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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

June 14, 1893.

No. 764.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LIX.

THE NEW YORK SHARPS' SHADOWER



OR.

The Game Sport of Rusty Gulch.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "OLD DOUBLEDARK," "DANGEROUS DAVE," "DARK JOHN," "PARADISE SAM," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BEFORE THE TRAGEDY.

THE five men who were seated in a room of a house on Varick street, New York, were planning a scheme which they expected would result to their gain and then cease to be heard from. They little suspected how much of thrilling interest, trouble and crime was to grow out of the scheme.

He who was the actual leader spoke with a satisfied smile.

"To-day sees the beginning of our plan, and

▲ QUICK KICK AND THE KNIFE WAS SENT FLYING AWAY, AND THEN THE SPORT'S FOOT WAS PLANTED ON HIS WOULD BE ASSASSIN'S BREAST.

I have faith to believe it will practically see the ending of it."

"I don't agree with you, Walton," replied the second man. "I expect old Abram Hamilton to make a strong fight."

"You may be right, Tony, but it's something I don't look for. He does not seem like a fighter, and if he is, why, I should not object to a little experience with him."

"I would rather have the experience with his pretty girl, Amy," declared Tony, with a laugh.

"Since you are enamored of Amy, I may as well say there is a prospect that she will be among the spoils," remarked Walton.

"You can have her by the winning, Tony."

"So I can have the sun and the moon by the winning," retorted Tony, disconsolately.

"Don't get down-hearted. But, let us speak only of business. You, Tony, are to meet Epsom Griggs and escort him to Hamilton's house. He is to go in and demand the money we covet. As his courage is not good, we agree to back him up, and for doing it we get a share of the plunder. A share? Bah! we take all or nothing. When Griggs has fleeced Hamilton we will fleece Griggs. If that old fossil thinks he is to benefit by this he will have a rough awakening later on."

"Let us hope we win."

"Win? We must and shall. With us it is to be a fight to a finish, as they would say in the ring. That's what we five are banded for—the Fancy Five, I may call us."

Walton had quite a sense of the ridiculous, and the general name he had selected for the combination impressed him as being especially happy, for two of the party were far from fancy in outward appearance.

And who were these men?

Egbert Walton, the leader, was a man of about thirty years, and not ill-looking. He had a somewhat comely face, and wore good clothes. He was cool and strong of nature, and a mystery, withal. He always had money enough, yet he toiled not neither did he spin—as far as was known. Where he got his cash even his most intimate friends did not know.

Tony Pierson was of about Walton's own age, and a flashily-dressed, red-faced fellow who made considerable of a show among certain classes and passed as a high-roller. He obtained his money chiefly as a race-track sharper.

Clarence Allyne, an insipid-looking person of twenty-three years, was a dude in dress, a weak creature by birth, and a nephew of Abram Hamilton by the chance of relationship.

The two other members of the Fancy Five were Dick Benner and Josh Martin, both of whom were typical city toughs in appearance.

Presently Walton looked at his watch.

"It is time for you to be off, Tony," he observed.

"Then I will go."

"We will await your return here. When you have seen old Griggs safely in Hamilton's house, come and make your report."

"All right; I will."

Pierson left the house and took his way to a saloon not many blocks away. There he found a seedy-looking old man bending over a glass of beer with the loving gaze of an idolator.

"So you're beering up, Epsom?" he questioned.

The seedy man looked up with a startled air.

"Oh! is it you, Mr. Pierson? Well, I am only taking a glass—"

"How many went before it?"

"A—only one, sir."

"Very likely you are lying, Epsom, but as you seem to be sober I will not kick. Are you ready for the work?"

"Yes, sir."

"Ready to get your money back, eh?"

"It was cruel fate that robbed me of my own!" cried Epsom, flushing. "Here Hamilton has been enjoying my money all these years, while I have been—"

The speaker hesitated, but Tony laughed and added:

"In the State's Prison at Joliet!"

"Hush! hush!" warned Epsom. "Don't say that so loud."

"Griggs, if you had been a strictly good man like me you would not have been

forced to wait so long for your rights. Hamilton euchered you out of your stuff, but you could have recovered it long ago if had not yourself broken the law so violently that the State of Illinois took you under her wing for ten years."

"Ten years of prison life!" sighed Griggs. "It was tough!"

"Well, you are out, now, and your money is waiting you. Come, let us go to Hamilton's."

"You don't—eh?—you don't think he will do me violence, do you, Mr. Pierson?"

"We all feel sure there is no danger, and you have yourself taken that view."

"I know, I dare say we are right, but I now feel just a trifle timid, somehow."

"Nonsense! Brace up, Epsom, for there is no need of idle forebodings. You will see Hamilton come to time quickly enough."

"Probably so," agreed Griggs, more hopefully.

"Come along, then, and let us put the machinery of retribution into effect."

They left the saloon, took a car and journeyed northward. In due time they reached a rather fine-looking house on West Nineteenth street.

"Go in, now," directed Tony. "I will wait here ten minutes, to see if you succeed in getting an audience. Undoubtedly you will, and when this is certain I will proceed to the home base and wait for you. Be sure you don't get rattled, now, for the Fancy Five will back you up in all you undertake. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then go ahead."

"Good-by, Mr. Pierson!"

"Good-by! Why do you say that?"

"I—I don't know."

"Of course you don't, for you will see me again in a few hours. Keep up your pluck, Epsom, for you hold all the winning cards. Get along, now, and remember you are sure to be a winner."

Griggs went, but with a dragging step which made Tony shake his head doubtfully.

"If the fellow ever had courage it was driven out of him by those ten years in Joliet; he is scared to death now. Still, he may be able to pull through, for it is said that Hamilton is lacking in pluck. A pretty pair they will be to fight it out, and I am of the opinion that Walton or myself ought to have gone with Epsom. Too late to think of it now, though, so I'll go and drink to Epsom's success. I need a pull at the cheering compound."

Tony had by this time seen Griggs admitted, and he went his way.

Griggs, seated in Hamilton's parlor, waiting for the man he was to confront, trembled perceptibly.

"I lack my old nerve," he sighed. "I have been used bad by fate, and all this while Abe has been living high with my money."

He looked around the well-furnished parlor and his indignation rose so much that a degree of courage came with it.

"Abe shall do me justice!" he murmured, resolutely.

The door opened and another man entered. It was Hamilton, and the crisis was at hand.

Like Griggs, Hamilton had seen the best years of his life, and he did not present any better figure than his visitor, except that he was comfortably dressed. He was about sixty years of age, and looked it all. Like his visitor, too, he had dried up under the passage of time, and he presented the appearance of a little, bent old man who would not please the critical eye.

He had a peculiar face, suggesting as it did in many ways the characteristics of a hawk. A keen, avaricious, mean face it was, and there were men and women in New York who would swear his looks did not belie him.

Abram loaned money as a source of income, and he now hoped for a client. He smiled and laid his hand on his stomach—a way he had at important moments.

"I am pleased to see you, sir," he said. "In what way can I be of assistance to you?"

"Can't you guess?" asked Epsom.

"Perhaps you want money?"

"I do."

"Good! You can get no better terms

from any reliable lender," and Abram grew more happy of look.

"Your terms—"

"Ten per cent., sir."

"Do you consider the use of money worth as much as that?"

"It is to me."

"I am glad to hear you say that."

Abram looked surprised. He was too much surprised, in fact, to be pleased. It was very unusual to have a borrower express satisfaction upon hearing his rates, since the legal rate was six per cent., and the exaction of anything greater carried with it the penalty of forfeiture of principal and interest, but he had always managed to get around that, and had continued to receive the interest named.

While he now hesitated Griggs spoke again.

"The reason why I am pleased to hear you say that money is worth ten per cent. to you is that I am not here to borrow, but to receive what you owe me."

"What I owe you?"

"Yes."

"I do not owe you anything."

"Are you sure?"

"Certainly. I owe no one."

"Think again."

"But there is no need of thinking. I never contract bills, but pay as I go."

"Did you always do that?"

"Well, years ago—"

"Yes, years ago? What then?"

"What the dickens are you driving at?" sharply demanded Hamilton.

"The money you owe me."

"If you say I owe you a cent, you lie!" cried the money-lender, angrily.

"Abe, is it possible you do not know me?" asked Griggs, with a change of tone.

"Had I ought to know you?"

"Turn your memory back. Think of the days when you did not have money to loan, but were in business. Then you were as much a struggling man as any who now come to you to borrow. Hard times you saw, but you went into business and your luck changed. How were you able to go into business, sir?"

Epsom was growing excited, and his voice rung out with more force. Hamilton became nervous. He leaned forward and looked his sharpest at the caller, but ten years in Joliet had change Griggs, and the light was poor in this room where they were.

"Who are you?" whispered Hamilton.

"Abe, don't you know me?"

Hamilton rose quickly, took a step and pushed the window shade further back. Light came in freely, and he looked to his fill.

"I think you know me now," said the visitor, quietly.

"Just heaven! it is Epsom Griggs!" gasped the money-lender.

CHAPTER II.

EPSOM TAKES A FATAL STEP.

ABRAM HAMILTON lost all of the little color common to his thin face, and he stared at the visitor as if he saw, not a ghost, but something infinitely worse. So he did. Under any condition such was the fact, while, under the conditions soon to follow, but now unseen by both men, this visit was a terrible thing for the usurer.

"Yes," spoke the visitor, you have named me correctly."

"Epsom Griggs!" repeated Hamilton, blankly.

The ex-convict smiled. He saw he had frightened his old acquaintance, and his own courage rose correspondingly.

"Quite right," he agreed.

"You—here?"

"I am nowhere else," and Epsom grew quite flippant.

"I thought you dead."

"Then you made a mistake."

"But I heard so."

"That does not prove it."

"Where have you been all this while?"

Griggs moved uneasily. He was afraid that, in some way, the connection he had had for ten years with the Joliet institution would come out and do him damage.

"Traveling," he answered.

"Why have you kept away from here?"

"I have—a—have been in foreign lands."

"Why are you here now?"

There was an emphasis to the question which made Epsom feel uneasy, and his manner was quite meek as he returned:

"To get my money."

"What do you expect of me?"

"Why, what do you suppose?"

"I am puzzled to know," answered Abram, serenely.

"Are you in possession of something like fifty thousand dollars which belongs to me?"

"Do you claim that I am?"

"Of course I do."

"Are you aware that the statute of limitation will apply to the case, I having held it so long—"

"Do you think I am so ignorant of the law as to believe this?" cried Epsom, angrily.

Such had been Abram's thought, but it was one conceived under the spur of the moment, and he quickly abandoned it when his companion thus sat down on the notion. He looked about for some other means of escape, for yield the money he was bound he would not.

"You claim you gave me this money—"

The slow, crafty utterance of the money-lender told all to Epsom, and he knew there was to be a struggle for the possession of the sum he claimed. Frightened, he broke in excitedly:

"You were in business, but doing poorly. You had been very unlucky, though you had the same shrewdness you showed later on. What you lacked was a little capital, so you could go ahead with certain plans you had formed, but which depended upon capital to get the breath of life.

"All this you told me, and, knowing I had money, you besought me to help you. Perhaps when you did this you were sincere enough, but the fact that you used my friendship to get the money from me, and then failed to pay, proved you to be the basest kind of a wretch.

"A man who will betray a friend thus is too vile for the company of a decent man.

"Well, I let you have it and became a silent partner in your business, and from that hour all went on swimmingly. You grew rich fast. Then I asked you for my money, or a share of the profits.

"You declared all was so bound up that to take anything out would hurt business, and you thus put me off from time to time. Finally I learned that in a legal transaction you had made oath that you were the sole partner in your business, and that no one else had a cent at stake in it.

"I went to you and asked for an explanation. You said that what you had sworn to was true. I asked you about the forty thousand dollars I had advanced to you, and you declared you had paid it to me."

"So I had!" declared Hamilton.

"You had not."

"I asked you then," replied the money-lender, coolly, "where your papers were to prove your claim—"

"And I went to get them and found you had stolen them."

"Stolen them!" cried Hamilton.

He accompanied the exclamation with a glance so fierce that Epsom's courage oozed out again.

"Then where were they?" he asked, more meekly.

"I paid you, one evening, and received the papers back."

"So you said then, but I deny it."

"One of us," added Abram, calmly, "labored under a great mistake. Either you were out of your mind when I paid you, or I was out of my mind when I thought I did."

"You never paid me a cent."

"Then you must have the papers to prove it."

"I have!"

Hamilton's face fell.

"Why do you talk such nonsense?" he asked, after an uneasy silence.

"I could not produce them then," went on the visitor, "and I repeat that it was because you had stolen them"—he did repeat it, but in a faint tone, and with every evidence of fear—"but it's different now. I have the papers!"

The two withered old men regarded each other during a long period of silence. So might two vultures have looked at one another when a meal was at stake, and neither

dared to move to seize it. Evil were the faces of the contestants in this war of words, and it would have been hard for an observer to know where to put his sympathies.

After a long while Hamilton spoke again.

"This is very odd," he asserted.

"I see nothing odd about it."

"I tell you I paid you that money!"

"And I tell you that you did not!"

"Then somebody is vastly mistaken. By my life, man! if I have done you wrong it is going to be undone, but I do not believe I have. Griggs, this shall be sifted to the bottom, and justice shall be done, let the blow fall where it may. My reputation will not allow me to be called a schemer in public, for honor is a business man's stock in trade. I know that now, if I did not always do so."

Fair enough it seemed on the surface and Epsom was staggered. Was this later-day Hamilton really willing to do justice?

"We will go over it all together," pursued the money-lender, "and if we can't agree we will call in experts. It must be settled. I do not believe I have a dollar of your money, but if I have, you shall receive it back."

"When?"

"As soon as we can look into the matter."

"I can do that to-morrow."

"Have you the papers with you now?"

"No."

"It is just as well, for," with a glance at the clock, "it is too late to go into it now, and at my age much sleep is needed. Griggs, this is very strange."

Epsom moved uneasily. Did the strange part come in where Hamilton claimed, or elsewhere?

"Either I paid you that money or I didn't," added the money-lender, "and the mistake of one of us is amazing. But you shall have your own if there is anything due you."

"There is."

"Then you shall have it."

Words are cheap, but Hamilton was so apparently sincere that his caller began to grow hopeful. It occurred to him that rich Abram Hamilton might be willing to do the act of justice the poor Hamilton had refused to do—all this was stirred up by the rich man's air of candor. Fairly he talked, and Epsom lost his doubts in a measure.

More, he lost his prudence. What might he not lose, still later?

After a good deal of talk which consumed time, Epsom said he thought he would go home.

"Why not stay with me?" asked Hamilton, pleasantly.

"Oh! I should intrude."

"Have you any business to call you away?"

"No, but I would not put you to the trouble—"

"What! with all the servants I keep? Don't mention it. Stay, by all means. You will find this more comfortable than a hotel, and the house is at your disposal. I want to show you that if there was any wrong done you in the past, I am not disposed to make you suffer for it any further."

It was said well, as far as words went, but the smile with which Abram accompanied it ought to have warned the caller. That smile was not a pleasant one, and had a good deal of the vulture about it, withal, but Epsom failed to see anything wrong in it.

Wishing to keep on the good side of his companion, he yielded and accepted the invitation. For weal or woe he decided to remain in the home of his old foe.

Abram, himself, escorted him up-stairs to a room, and then left him with a pleasant good-night. When he was gone there was a sudden change of feeling with the caller.

"What have I done?" he exclaimed.

He looked around with an expression of actual fear on his face.

"Am I in his house? Can it be I have committed such folly?"

Epsom was scared. Why? As far as he knew there was nothing in the host's life to indicate that he would do harm to any one, yet Epsom was in bodily fear. It was simply because he was a timid man. A thief he knew Hamilton to be, but greater crimes he had never been led to believe the man would commit.

Still, Epsom was frightened badly.

"I will sneak out of the house and be gone from here when no one is looking," he added. "I shall put my life in jeopardy if I stay here over night. But if I go he will be angry and refuse to deal fairly with me, perhaps."

It was a thought which could not but cause dismay. Coward that Epsom was he did not now see his way clear. If he went secretly he would incur Hamilton's ill will, while if he stayed—ah! there was the rub. What if he stayed?

He considered the whole matter carefully, but was obliged to admit, to himself, that there was no visible ground for the fears he felt. Not being shrewd enough to feign illness and send for help, or in any other way to get out of his dilemma skillfully, he concluded to remain.

"It will be safe—I hope."

With this thought he went to bed.

His fears were not allayed, but the half-formed resolution to remain awake did not long keep him conscious. He fell asleep, and time passed on.

The rash visitor was not situated so as to take note of the things which were occurring around him. He did not hear a gentle rattling of the door which led from his room to that immediately beyond; he did not see the door open, nor did he see the dark form which crept in so secretly and silently.

Immediately after, however, he did awaken. The glare of light was on his face, and it was enough to rouse him. He opened his eyes, and to his startled vision was presented the most ominous sight of his life.

Perhaps it was the last sight of his life.

CHAPTER III.

THE CRIME OF THE NIGHT.

THE first thing that Epsom saw was a club; the next was the man who held it. This was Abram Hamilton. The master of the house had been partially bending over the sleeper, his gaze sharply fixed on the face below, but this watchfulness on his part did not prove friendly attention.

Epsom Griggs saw that face and his heart seemed to cease beating. Never pleasing to the eye, Hamilton now had an expression simply fiendish. It was a terrible sight for the guest of the house.

For a moment the two men stared at each other. If Epsom was dismayed at seeing what he took to be an assassin, Hamilton was dismayed at seeing his foe's eyes wide open. If one was not accustomed to wild adventure, the other was not practiced in this line of crime.

Epsom was stupefied with horror. He tried to move, to shout for help, but could not. Not a word passed his hot lips.

That sight—the man with the unfriendly face and the uplifted club—it was too much for endurance. Being unable to resist the implied threat, Epsom simply wilted before it.

But the spell around Hamilton was suddenly broken. Arousing, he flashed into life and action, and while his expression became more ominous and terrible, his right hand suddenly went higher in the air.

The club moved with the hand.

Epsom found the power of speech.

"Mercy!" he gasped.

He tried to start up.

Too late! The club fell, and it was upon his head. He dropped to the pillow again, but Abram was not done. Other blows he rained on the head of the man he hated and feared, and as there was no resistance he had it all his own way.

Finally he paused through sheer exhaustion; not that the exertion should have wearied him so much, but his system was unstrung. Suspending operations he gazed at the victim of his cowardly assault.

"Dead!" he whispered.

The clock on the mantel ticked loudly in the ominous silence which would otherwise have existed.

"Dead!" added Abram, "and I am free!"

Perhaps, since he had come so deliberately to do the deed, the words should have been an expression of triumph, but they were not. Victorious though he was, the money-lender was ghastly pale and trembling like a leaf. He dropped into a chair.

"He will not claim the money, now," the assassin muttered. "Fool! he had better

have stayed dead, as I thought him, than to come here and try to recover what I have held so long."

For Epsom's charge had been true in every particular; Abram had wronged him out of the money in the past just as was alleged, and when Epsom had been invited to stay over night it had been with the deliberate intention on Abram's part to murder him.

Now it was done the man lost all courage. He sat there for a long time, and in a mood so nervous that the ticking of the clock frightened him, and further sounds would have scared him into headlong flight.

It was not conscience, but the fear which crime begets in the human mind, and it was an emotion almost overpowering.

Anon he remembered that he had more to do and he tried to go about it. The body must be disposed of, and as he had all this planned it was not so very difficult a job in one sense of the word; but when he tried to rise and begin, he realized that he had hard work in another way. Conscience was still mute, but to go where he could look on the face of the man he had slain—there was a horror in the mere thought which made his soul shrink.

Finally he had an idea.

Rising, he took the spread from the table and, turning his face away, advanced toward the bed and covered that other face from sight. This done he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now I shall not have to look at him," he observed.

Another test was at hand, for the body must be carried away, but he had grown stronger since there was no danger of seeing the face, and he did not doubt his ability to do it easily, as far as mere muscle was concerned.

He began to gather up the body, but paused as a new idea came to him. Zealously as he had struck he had no positive proof that his foe was dead, and this proof must be had.

Nerving himself anew he thrust his hand under the spread and felt first for the pulse and then for the heart-beat of Epsom Griggs. He could distinguish neither.

"Dead!" he murmured again, and with relief.

Then he essayed to lift the body, but the spread perversely slipped aside and all his work was for nothing. The face was fully revealed! Then Abram uttered a hoarse cry and fled. Out into the hall he dashed—then his wits returned sufficiently to prevent further mistakes of this kind and he paused.

His heart was throbbing with tremendous force, but he stood still until he was calmer. He had to take this course, for he had a task to do and it must not be deferred.

Finally he returned to the room. Again he approached the body in a secret way, never looking toward the bed directly; again he gathered up the spread and placed it over the dead face.

Hesitating no longer he suddenly, abruptly lifted the body and bore it away. When he paused it was in the cellar.

At one side there was a little room, or, more properly, inclosure like a room, and in this there was a hole in the earth. When he bought the house he was told that a former owner used to keep his wines in this cavity. It had not been used since Abram had the house, but there was use for it now.

Down in the excavation he laid the body, and then over the top he put the boards which had covered the excavation before. This done he dragged an old, abandoned refrigerator and some other things to the spot and put them on top of the boards.

Thus was Epsom buried and fastened in.

"To-morrow," spoke Abram, softly, "I will get a spade and cover the thing deep in the earth, though I suppose it would long remain there and not be discovered by anybody."

He was much cooler now the object was out of sight, and he went back to the room of the tragedy.

Then he realized that much had been forgotten. The visitor's clothing was there, and the spread was not there. It was a grim and awful necessity, but one not to be avoided—the clothes must go to where the late wearer was. So Abram had to go and open the impromptu vault, an act which gave him

fresh terror, but it was done. He came back with the spread and put it on the table.

Then he sunk into a chair, utterly overwhelmed.

Weak as a child he was, and his eyes had a hunted look which would have attracted attention anywhere.

"Scoundrel, scoundrel!" he murmured, "why did he compel me to do this? Why did he force me into crime? It was an infamous act on his part, and he deserved all he has got. Scoundrel!"

He really regarded his victim as the one who was to blame, but this did not lighten his fears.

"I forgot to learn," he added, presently, "if he had friends in the city, but if this was so I will deny all. Deny? Yes, but will it do any good? Will justice overtake me? Oh! the scoundrel! why should he compel me to do this?"

Long the money-lender sat and thought on the situation, but he finally rose and sought his own bed.

On the evening of the next day Egbert Walton sat in his private room on Varick street. He looked tired, jaded and troubled. The day had not been one of pleasure for the Fancy Five. They had been trying to find Epsom Griggs. That man had failed to return to them as they had expected, so they had sought for him, but sought in vain.

His disappearance worried them.

They could not account for it, and there was no way, thus far, to answer the various questions which occurred to them.

Had Epsom become frightened and run away? Had Hamilton bribed him to give up his attempt? Or had he met with foul play at the hand of his foe?

One of these things must have happened, they thought, and as they could find no sign of him, and they dared not go to Hamilton's house to investigate, they were a good deal in the dark.

Clarence Allyne had been deputized to learn if Epsom had remained long in his uncle's house, but this could not be done, perhaps, as the younger man was not in good standing there.

"Hang it!" muttered Walton, "if this plot has fallen through it will be a confounded shame. Of course Griggs would have got but a mouthful out of his boodle, and the rest of us have simply been swindled if the scheme miscarries."

His indignation was about on a par with that of Hamilton, who had blamed Epsom for having been slain by himself.

A servant came to the door.

"A gentleman to see you, Mr. Walton."

"Show him in!" was the quick reply, and she went away. Then Egbert grew thoughtful. "Perhaps I was rash to suppose it was Griggs. Why was I so stupid as to forget to ask her who it was?"

The caller entered. It was not Epsom, but a much younger man, substantial of body and mind, one would say. He had a keen and alert look, as if he felt able to work his way anywhere.

"Good-evening, sir," he began.

"Good-evening," answered Walton, none too cordially.

"My name is Terrill."

"I do not remember you."

"Naturally, for we never have had any associations, sir. To-might I have come on business."

"I shall be pleased to hear what it is."

So spoke Walton, but he still regarded Mr. Terrill suspiciously.

"I wish to inquire for a gentleman of whom you have some knowledge."

"Who is that?"

"Epsom Griggs."

Walton experienced an unpleasant feeling.

"What do you mean?"

"Where is he?"

"I don't know."

"He was with you yesterday."

"I have not seen him since."

"Where did he go when he left you?"

"To a hotel, he said, though I do not know what one."

"He has not since been at the hotel where he was stopping."

"Then I do not know anything about him."

The men were talking quietly, but there was an undercurrent which was not in keeping with their conversation. What Terrill thought, his host had no means of knowing, but he was wondering what Terrill was driving at, anyhow. In their connection with Epsom no law had thus far been broken by the Fancy Five, but they had an ax to grind, and Walton did not look with friendly feeling on any man who would interfere.

Who and what was this man Terrill?

CHAPTER IV.

A DETECTIVE DISPOSED OF.

WALTON and his visitor regarded each other in a sort of armed neutrality. Both were men of strong will and decisive action. As yet the leader of the Fancy Five did not know they were bound to be enemies, but he considered Terrill as his natural, if not deliberate enemy.

"May I ask why you wish to find Epsom Griggs?" he asked, after a pause.

"I know him," laconically replied Terrill.

"Oh! a friend of his."

"Hardly that, though I know him."

"I am sorry I can't help you."

"You have had business dealings with Griggs, haven't you?"

"Casually, only."

"May I ask of what nature?"

"And may I ask why you want to know?" cried Walton, less serenely.

"Yes. It's because I am a detective."

"Ah!"

Walton was not so cool but he now gave a little start of nervousness. Of all persons he least admired detectives.

"You will see," pursued Terrill, "that my motive is not an idle one, and that I have good cause to inquire for him."

"Do you wish to arrest him?"

"Griggs," explained Terrill, "is a graduate of the Illinois State's Prison. When he was released he might have been arrested for another crime, but it was thought well to give him a chance to lead a decent life. We let him go where he would, and he came to New York. It has been our intention to look after him, and see how he did. This has been my duty, and I have had no trouble until now. His disappearance, however, puts me in a quandary."

"I feel sure he has broken no law, and indulged in no crooked practices."

Terrill smiled quietly.

"He is well answered for."

"Sir?"

"I do not think, Mr. Walton, that your recommendation would go far in court. You and Tony Pierson do not carry the best of characters."

"What has that to do with it?" demanded the host, warmly.

"When an ex-convict seeks such company it is not a good sign to those who would prefer to see him do well."

Walton assumed a haughty air.

"I consider my reputation all right," he declared, and I do not propose to sit here and be insulted. I have told you all I know about Griggs, and if you want to know more you have only to find it out. I do not know what he has been with others, but with us he has not taken part in any illegal work, for the very good reason that we would not be with him in such a thing."

"I am glad to learn that you are such immaculate gentlemen."

Smiling sarcastically Mr. Terrill rose and prepared to depart. He asked no more questions and went out with a courteous good-night on his lips. Once more Walton was alone.

"Confound the fellow!" cried the man of unknown employment, "what is he trying to do? Watching a released convict to see if he keeps in the path of rectitude? He lies when he says it! Would the disappearance of a day bring out a searcher in such a case? Well, I should say not. This Terrill gave me a lie. Now, what is his business, really?"

The many times that Walton had defied and broken the law now rose to cause him uneasiness, and he saw menace in all this.

"I must follow him!" was his decision.

He put on his hat and hurried out, but he did not find Terrill. The detective had been swallowed up in the depths of the city very quickly—so quickly, indeed, that Walton suspected he had arranged for it previously.

The matter was so productive of worryment that he went to see Tony Pierson, and the whole case was discussed fully.

"I do not believe he cared a fig for Epsom Griggs!" declared Walton.

"Then why should he mention him?"

"An excuse."

"But why put us on our guard by accusing us of designs with Griggs?"

"True."

"I think he does want to know about Epsom."

"Why?"

"Now you have me."

"Tony, we must look into this sharply. I scent danger, and we must ward it off. If Terrill is on our track he must be removed."

"So he must."

"Can you see the way?"

"Let the morrow decide. We will hunt Terrill, and if we can locate him we will see what he is doing. Then we can tell what to do."

"Good! We will have all of the Fancy Five out to search, and if we do not find Terrill it will be a wonder. Once found, we may be able to lure him somewhere and settle his spying trip."

The following night a man rose from his chair in a room of a house on West street. It was a small and mean house, and those who lived in it were supposed to be very poor. One floor was occupied by a man named Dick Benner. He was said to be an iron-worker, but was on a permanent "strike," it seemed, for no one ever had seen him labor. His only known relative was his daughter, Peggy.

On this occasion, when he rose, he spoke to Peggy curtly.

"Time fer you ter go to bed, gal."

"Be you goin' out?" asked the girl.

"Yes."

"Wal, ef there's time fer you to go out an' get full of beer, there is time fer me to read the rest of this story," replied Peggy, frankly.

"I tell ye ter go ter bed," snapped Dick.

"My! ain't we gettin' lordly!" cried Peggy.

"Now, see here! Don't you talk that way ter me!"

"What's my tongue made fer?" inquired Peggy, calmly.

"Not ter sass me, an' don't you think it is. You hush up, gal! D'ye hear me?"

Dick Benner's daughter had been reared in a social atmosphere which made her free of speech, and she usually defied her father in a quiet way. Still, when he set out to be obeyed, she did not resist openly, and there was now that in his voice which told that it was a time for obedience—on the surface, at least. She rose, took a lamp and moved toward the door which led to her room and went out of the main room with the comment:

"I've seen mean folks before, but you take the cake!" And when the door closed behind her she muttered: "Yes, I'll go so far, but I won't go to bed until I get ready!"

Undutiful Peggy! Of actual obedience she gave but little, but did Dick Benner deserve more? And if he did deserve it, had the way in which he had reared her prepared her for such obedience?

He growled angrily when she was gone, and then went out of the house. As he opened the door he met another man, who was, in fact, none other than Egbert Walton.

"Ha! how is it, Dick?" was the abrupt inquiry.

"All well here," Dick answered.

"Everything clear at the pier?"

"Yes."

"Did you get the watchman drugged all right?"

"Yes. He was as glad to get the whisky as a man would be to get a million dollars, and he just sucked it down lively. By this time he is under the influence of the drug."

"Then we are likely to succeed. Josh Martin is on the way with Terrill in charge. Ha! ha! Terrill thinks he will find Epsom in hiding here. Josh has pulled the wool over his eyes neatly, and if we can get in the blow, Terrill will go out of the world forever, to-night!"

"No sign of Epsom, yet, eh?"

"No, and it's very odd, but this is no time

to think about him. To cover, Dick, and let us watch for the coming of Terrill to his doom!"

They stepped into a recess between Dick's house and that next to it, and several minutes passed without further excitement. Then Walton grasped Dick's arm.

"Look!" he cried.

"They are coming!"

"Yes. Keep back, now, and don't interfere with me."

Walton drew a slung-shot and gave it a scientific whirl around his head. No novice was he in the use of the cowardly weapon, and he expected to do execution with it now.

"Terrill is wholly unsuspecting," whispered Dick.

"So it seems."

"He an' Josh walk as quiet ez ef they was out fer a fishin' trip."

"One of them will be, soon."

"So he will. Ha! ha!"

"Quiet, Dick! Not a word, now."

Nearer came the decoy and his companion. Josh was talking briskly and Terrill did not seem to see anything suspicious about the matter. Close to the house they walked, and then Josh paused.

"This is the place."

"Knock, then."

"Be ye all ready?"

"Yes; let the work go on," Terrill directed.

It did go on, though not in the way he could wish. Walton had made good use of his time, and crept softly out of the recess. Now he swung the slung-shot, and it fell on Terrill's head with the force of a true death-blow. The detective dropped to the ground, but the assassin was not content. Twice, thrice more he struck, though there had not been any stir on Terrill's part, and then he ceased.

"I'll guarantee that," he exclaimed, hurriedly. "Now, get him to the pier, and let us have it all over with."

Seizing the prostrate man they carried him away, and, after making sure no one was on the watch, they bore him across the street and out on the pier. There they had things all their own way, and they were soon at the remotest end.

"Where is the weight?" asked Walton, anxiously.

"Here!" Dick replied.

"Tie it to his waist."

This was done.

"Now drop him over."

This was the easiest task of all, and the detective was cast out into space. He fell; there was a splash; the water opened to receive him; the weight did its work and the body sunk from sight.

"Done!" spoke Walton, deeply. "Back out of sight!"

Hurriedly they crossed the pier and the street.

"A good job well done!" quoth the leader, with a sigh of relief. "There will be no more trouble from this fellow, boys, and we can go about our business feeling there is no spy after us. A good job!"

Was it what he asserted? Successful it was for the time, but would luck continue to be with the men who had begun a campaign so tragically?

CHAPTER V.

A SPORT FROM THE WEST.

"A GENTLEMAN to see you, sir."

Such was the word which was brought to Abram Hamilton. If it had come a short time before he would have given permission to have the man admitted without further ceremony, but, of late, he had been careful as to who was admitted until he knew more of them.

There was a card in the servant's hand, and the money-lender took it and looked at it attentively.

"Norman Nickol!" he muttered. "I never heard of him before. What does he look like, Bridget?"

"Faith, sir, I never saw the one who looked like him before, except the cowboys in the play I seen in the Bowery. Sure, his hair is long enough fer a woman's, but no cowboy clothes does he wear. He's dressed up to kill, so he is."

"Who can he be?"

"A gambler, I should say."

"Why a gambler?"

"Because he's a sport, if there ever was one, but of the race-track sort. Sport he is, but I don't know his kind."

"Well, well, let me see him."

Bridget went her way, and in a short time the stranger entered. Prepared as Abram was, in part, he was surprised at the appearance of the caller.

He was nearly six feet in height, and finely formed; a man who combined those qualities which rarely go together, strength and grace. Besides this he had a face which women would call handsome. It was a face of regular features, smooth skin and fine curves, and was set off by a showy mustache. The latter, together with his hair, was of the deepest black in color, and with his bronzed complexion, telling of life under a warm sun, he was a striking figure. To add to this he wore his hair so long that it fell in waving lines over his collar.

All this was true Western style, but, as had been pointed out by the servant, his clothes were not of the West-land. No native New Yorker, be he ever so rich, could have excelled this man in the devotion to true city fashion, or the elegance and beauty of his attire. Right from a city tailor those clothes surely were.

This really handsome man dazzled old Abram, who did not know what to make of him, but the stranger came forward quickly, seized Abram's hand and shook it warmly.

"How are you, pard?" he demanded, frankly. "Just run in to see you for a moment, though I am in a deuce of a hurry. Of course you read my card—I have some, New York style, though we don't care a thing for such notions in Rusty Gulch—game was on it—Norman Nickol, commonly called Nerve Nickol."

"I don't understand," said Abram, bewildered.

"What! ain't you onto my curves?"

"Eh?"

"Can't you make the lead?"

"What lead?"

"Why, the signs."

"Well, I don't just understand, I confess."

The long-haired man hooked his finger into a frayed button-hole of Abram's coat.

"You got the card?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was mine; N. Nickol, late of Rusty Gulch. See the lead now?"

"Hem-m-m!"

Abram did not see, but he did not worry his visitor about it.

"I presume you have business with me?" he added.

"Yes. How's things in New York? Just everlastingly booming in Rusty Gulch, by Jove! Biz'way up, and still booming. Got a population of three thousand and not yet out of our swaddling clothes. How's that for a starter? That's straight, and you get it from me—N. Nickol, late of the Gulch."

"You said you had business with me?" somewhat impatiently suggested Mr. Hamilton.

"If I said so I'm like G. Washington, who seldom told a lie. Here! Pour the beams of your eyes over this doc!"

Breezy N. Nickol handed out a letter, and his host was glad to get to work on the singular visitor's case, at last. This was what he read:

"RUSTY GULCH, COLO., June 10.

"DEAR MR. HAMILTON:—This will introduce Mr. Norman Nickol, of this town, and one of its leading citizens. I ran down from Denver a few days ago, and renewed old acquaintance with him, and as he is about to go to New York I take pleasure in recommending him to your kind attention. He thinks of investing heavily in your city, and is willing to pay due commissions, etc. You will see what our wealthy citizens of the West are like. Any favor you can do will be thankfully acknowledged by your friend and agent, who is,

"Very truly,

"WARDWELL CHORTON."

There was nothing mysterious about this letter. It was from a Denver business man who had acted as agent for Abram in placing loans the latter had made there, and it had one word, if no more, which appealed to the reader's mind keenly—the word "commissions."

His eyes brightened. Here was a chance to make money. He grasped the visitor's hand again.

"My dear sir, I am glad to see you!" he declared.

"Eh?"

"I said I was glad to see you."

"Thunder! I thought we had got past that, but if we haven't, here goes! Pard, there's my fin, and may you live long and strike a lead every day. Here's to you!" and the man from Rusty Gulch almost crushed his companion's hand in the warmth of his grasp.

"So you think of making a start in New York?"

"Yes, you bet I'll do the town!"

"I—I have spare room in my house—"

Abram hesitated over the invitation. He wanted to give it, but did not want it accepted. Unless he could make considerable money out of this rich Westerner he did not want to be to the expense of feeding him three times a day.

Norman Nickol helped him out.

"Mighty good of you, old man, but I shall have to pass. You can open this jack-pot without me, and I'll see others for the stuff. In brief, I'm at a hotel, and there I may as well anchor."

"Sorry, *very* sorry, but it may be as well. Mine is a humdrum house, anyhow. What—ahem!—what line of investments have you in mind?"

"Just what I shall want your advice on, later. Shall take some days to look around and see the prospects—not to waste time in frivolity, for that is not my line, but to see what I think best—then we will see what *you* think best. Are you onto my curves?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! I like a man who gets there with both feet; that's Rusty Gulch style, and I'm in with the workers in the hive—Norman Nickol, yours truly."

The breezy manner of the man from the West staggered Abram, even with the word "commissions" ringing in his ears, but he managed to keep duly calm on the surface.

They had a talk of several minutes, and were still at it when the door opened and a young lady entered. She stopped short.

"Excuse me, father," she requested; "I did not know you had a caller."

"Amy!"

Abram spoke as she was about to go out, and then added:

"There is no haste, my child. This is Mr. Nickol, a client from the West. My daughter, Amy, sir—"

Thus far did the money-lender get, and Miss Hamilton was prepared to give the sort of greeting called for by the rules of polite society, but Nerve Nickol put a stop to all else by swooping down upon her and seizing her hand in a warm grasp.

"Glad to see you, miss!" he asserted. "Confound me if it isn't a sight for stricken eyes! Haven't seen much of the fair sex since I left Rusty Gulch. Tried to speak to a girl on Broadway, yesterday, for she took my eye, but she looked at me in a way which would freeze hot water before you could say 'Jack Robinson!,' declared she didn't know me and skipped with her head up in the air. Hang it all! I knew she didn't know me before she said so. Why was she so mighty exact? Perhaps you know, but I ain't onto all the New York curves, yet."

All this while he was shaking the young lady's hand cordially, much to her embarrassment.

"Glad to see you, miss," he added. "Here's my card—N. Nickol late of Rusty Gulch!"

Now, Amy Hamilton had never seen such a man as this breezy person from the West, and his manner was such that she would have been disgusted if it had been anybody else. But Mr. Nickol had so much good-humor with his assurance that she did not feel angry.

"I am pleased to meet you, sir," she replied.

"Honest Injun?"

"Beg pardon?"

"What for?"

Innocently Nickol asked the question, and the absurdity of the thing so impressed Amy that she could not help laughing. Why she did this Nickol did not understand, but his big soul expanded and he joined heartily in the laugh.

"Just so, by mighty!" he declared,

Amy made a hard effort to regain her composure and succeeded in a measure.

"We do not seem to understand each other very well, but that need not trouble us. There is a difference in customs, you know."

"That's where you get down to bed-rock. We have our way at Rusty Gulch, and we wear red flannel shirts and lynch a man now and then, but even at the lynching we bear no malice. Why, I've seen the chief of the lynchers step up to the fellow who was about to be swung off and wish him a pleasant journey with all the kindness in the world."

"I see."

"Of course. Well, Miss Hamilton, I'm glad to have run up against you, and I'll call around again in a few days and see you."

"Do so, Mr. Nickol," hastily directed Abram, with a glance at his daughter.

Amy had not been inclined to receive Norman's last promise in good-humor, but she saw the glance and did not offer objection. She said a few appropriate words and then went out of the room.

"Girl of yours, did you say, pard?" inquired Nickol.

"Yes," returned Abram.

"By thunder! she's a screamer!"

"Amy is a fine girl!"

"I'll gamble my socks on that!" cried the man from Rusty Gulch, with emphasis.

"We shall hope to see you often."

"If you don't you can set it down that the lynchers of New York have got me foul. See me often? You bet, you will!"

CHAPTER VI.

"A DEAD-GAME SPORT."

It was half an hour later when the man from Rusty Gulch left the house, and Abram then sought the presence of his daughter.

"Amy," he inquired, "what did you think of our visitor?"

"He is a nondescript," replied the young lady, smiling.

"A fine man, though."

"I should say he was an honest, whole-souled man, with all the originality commonly supposed to be an attribute of those from his section. He is surely original."

"He will call on us again."

"Yes?"

"And I trust you will do what you can to make it pleasant for him."

"How does he happen to be with you?" asked Amy, who, though she was interested in Nickol, was not yet disposed to say just how she would receive such an oddity.

"He is very rich, and wishes to invest here in New York. He is recommended by my Western agent, and I am to advise and assist him, and get commissions therefor, so we must use him well."

Amy sighed. She knew of old that her father's ideas of who was to be used well, and the reverse, were all governed by whether he could make money out of his connection with them.

Very different was she from the head of the Hamilton house. She was unselfish and womanly in all things, and as free from the unwholesome atmosphere of the family as Abram was bound up in it—a pretty girl, too, that any one would have been proud to know.

In the mean while Nerve Nickol had gone back to the hotel, which was one of the very best that the city of New York could boast of, and where he had luxurious apartments and lived in great style.

Arriving there he was met by his valet, Joseph Jones.

This man he had engaged upon his arrival in the city. It had been a condition of the search, when he looked for this, to him, new luxury, that the valet was to be an Englishman, and such Joseph was never doubted to be by those who knew the breed well.

Joseph had the stout form, red face and mutton-chop whiskers which go with the typical English valet, and all the other visible characteristics. Nickol had at first been disappointed because he did not speak like a cockney, but this disappointment had worn off.

To Norman, Joseph was a perpetual joy. Life at Rusty Gulch did not call for the ser-

vices of a valet, but Norman was bound to do the right thing in the great city. He did more than that, for, being accustomed to wait on himself, he would have relieved Joseph from all labor, now, if Joseph had not quietly gone about his duties and performed them. At the start Norman had but a vague notion of what a valet was for, but he was learning.

Now, Joseph came to him in his quiet, well-bred way.

"Mr. Nickol, more bills have come in," he remarked.

"Thunder! you don't say so!" exclaimed Norman.

"Yes, sir; it's two hundred dollars now."

"Is it?"

"Yes, sir. Shall I take it around, sir?"

"Take what?"

"The pay, sir."

"Oh! Yes, take it around, Joseph, and let it be done at once. I like to pay my bills promptly. Take it around, and say to them—'whoever they are—that it's all right. Here is the money—' Ah! I find I haven't cash enough to liquidate. I'll write out a check."

"I'll go and get it cashed, sir, immediately."

"Eh? Oh! I reckon the banks are closed now."

"Not for an hour, sir."

"Well, they are always rushed at the closing hours, and as I don't like to bother them, we will wait until to-morrow. Let it rest for now, Joseph."

Nerve Nickol went into his private room. As soon as he had the door closed he indulged in a long, hearty but silent laugh. To render it silent he held his hand over his mouth and shut off all sounds that might betray him to his valet.

When he had subdued his risibilities a little he commented thus:

"Thunder! what would Joe say if he knew I haven't twenty dollars to my name? Checks be hanged! The only bank I can draw on is cheek. Poor old Joe! I hope I shall not disgrace him. Let me see how I stand."

The rich man from Rusty Gulch took out a sparse collection of cash and counted it.

"Nine dollars and sixty-one cents. This represents my whole earthly fortune, and there's nothing to draw from but luck. Invest with Abe Hamilton as my agent? Thunder! I couldn't buy a door-mat for my house if I could rent one. Ha! ha! this would make a play with a title of 'How to be a Millionaire on Less than Ten Dollars!'"

Again Nickol laughed heartily, but he presently grew more serious and meditatively handled the money before him. It was a fact that it was all he had in the world—except his fine clothes some of which were paid for, and others unpaid.

He had not come to New York as a wealthy man save in imagination, and could not possibly have returned to Rusty Gulch without making a raise.

"Something must be done," he admitted, thoughtfully. "Unless I can settle these bills the bubble will burst right away. I must get cash. How? If tradition sayeth aright there is a prejudice among some in this city against men who gather in dust by playing cards, but that is just what I must do now. I see no other way. Here goes!"

He sauntered down to the lower part of hotel.

Now, this place, with all its big name, was noted as the resort of sporting men of all kinds, and Norman was not long in getting what he desired—a chance at poker.

If this were not the chronicle of the more important doings of the man from Rusty Gulch it would be interesting to tell how he worked into that game. First he interested those who became his partners in himself as a man from the West, and then other steps were taken.

Finally, five persons sat down to play.

Nickol pretended to be averse to a big stakes, and thus kept secret the lightness of his pocketbook. The game began. He won easily for some time, until he had fifty dollars to his name. Thus far he had been playing for safety, but he now "let out a link," as he mentally expressed it.

Resorting to shrewdness he led the foe on, played skillfully but cautiously with them, and finally had the situation just where he wanted it. With good cards in his hands,

and only one other man "staying," he ran the betting up as far as he could. He won. He rose from the table with fifteen hundred dollars in his pocket.

This is the account in brief. The full story would take much space and would tell of his wonderful nerve, skill and judgment; it would tell of the men who watched with breathless interest; it would tell that, when all was over and Nickol had gone away, he was summed up by one spectator thus tersely:

"A dead-game sport!"

Such was the beginning of Nerve Nickol's fast-approaching reputation in the line indicated by this comment.

Immediately after the man from Rusty Gulch found a person who was agent for suburban lands, and this man tried to secure his name for an investment of a thousand dollars. Nickol ignored the proposition, but was willing to speak of something bigger, and when they parted he had promised to consider another offer looking to the immediate payment of forty thousand dollars for a share in the suburban scheme.

Surely, he was a dead-game sport.

People began to talk about him, too.

"He has made a huge fortune in mining interests," was the explanation of all.

"And come here to spend his cash?"

"Yes."

"He is in just the right place."

He was, if he had possessed the cash, but it was an unfortunate fact that he did not have it.

The raise lately made put him in good spirits, and he had a brief chat with Joseph—he was too shrewd to hand over money then for the liquidation of his bills, though he saw the way clear to pay them—and then he went out alone.

When he stopped it was at another hotel. This place was very different from his own resort, and expenses would not have been one-half as much. This did not concern him, and he went to the register and began to turn the leaves.

Page by page he went back for ten days, and then paused with his finger on a certain name. This was the record:

"Epsom Griggs, Albany."

Long and earnestly he looked at it, and then turned to the clerk.

"Pard, is Mr. Griggs stopping here now?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Where is he?"

"Just what we would like to know."

"How is that?"

"He owes us ten dollars."

"Won't he pay?"

"We have not seen him since the date above the record you have."

"What! did he skip?"

"He disappeared, surely. Why he did so we don't know."

"How did he disappear?"

"He went out, one evening, and did not come in again."

"Ah!" murmured Nerve Nickol.

"May I ask what you know of him, sir?"

"Practically nothing," replied the Westerner, lightly. "I met him once, and, learning he was here, or supposed to be, I ran in to meet him."

"Is he a responsible man?"

"In what way?"

"Is he honest?"

Nerve Nickol caressed his chin reflectively.

"Well, I wouldn't like to bring a libel suit on myself, but it is a fact that I would not trust Mr. Griggs for more than his weight in gold, pard."

"Just how we figured it."

"By which you mean—what?"

"We think he has skipped his bill."

"I don't!" declared Nickol, with emphasis.

"What then?"

"Can't say, really. All I know is that I reckon he wanted to keep on all right here, and it's more likely he never thought of eucherizing you at all. Still as I said before, he and I are almost strangers, and I don't claim to know about him."

The clerk had taken an interest in this conversation, since there was an unpaid bill at stake, but just then he had a call to other duties, and he turned away. So did Nerve Nickol, and he seemed glad of the chance. He turned and had another encounter.

He almost ran into a person who greeted him cheerfully:

"Hullo, mister!"

CHAPTER VII.

PLUM GILDER'S POINTERS.

NERVE NICKOL had almost collided with the person, and he had to draw back a little before he saw that it was a half-grown boy. More than this, it was a boy so plainly clad that the sport's own fine clothes would have justified him in ignoring the boy if he had been a proud man, but he was not, and he returned the greeting.

"Hullo, young man!"

"Did ye get the p'inters you wanted?" added the boy.

"What pointers?"

"About the man you asked about?"

"How do you know I asked about any man?"

"I heard ye."

"Oh! did you? And who are you? Bell-boy? Waiter? Elevator fiend, or what?"

"I ain't none o' them, an' I don't belong in this place. Jest dropped in ter see about things, ye see. Heard ye ask about Griggsy, an' got interested, fer I knew him, ye see."

"Did you, though? Where is he?"

"I don't know, but ef we talk et over we may both get some p'inters, an' all be happy. See?"

"Who are you, youngster?"

"Plum Gilder."

"That's a right fine name, and calls up recollections of my mother's preserve jars. So you knew Griggs. Boy, suppose we sit down here and compare notes? We may be able to get light on this subject."

"Fire ahead, mister!"

The young stranger seemed more than willing, and it was done. In a recess by a window looking out on the street they reopened the conversation. Nerve Nickol asked:

"What do you know of Griggs?"

"Do you pose as his friend or his foe?" demanded Plum Gilder, in return.

"I am his friend."

"How much do you know o' him? I heard what you said to the clerk, but that don't tell much. Git up steam an' tell me more."

"There isn't much to tell. I really know next to nothing about him. Casual acquaintance; that's all."

"But ef he was in trouble you would help him, would ye?"

"Yes."

"Do ye know Egbert Walton?"

"Never heard of him."

"Or Tony Pierson, Clarence Allyne or Dick Benner?"

"No."

"Mister," spoke Plum Gilder, leaning forward in his chair, "it's my opinion them fellers hev done Griggsy up, by mighty!"

"Why should they?"

"Don't know."

"Who are they?"

"Crooks!"

"Aha! has Griggs been in with such a crowd?"

"He has, sure ez you are here. He fell inter mighty bad company when he come ter New York, mister. Can't say whether he took ter sech company from choice, but mix with them he did. They are all crooks, and when they got Griggsy in tow they seemed ter unite fer some object, though they never was chums before, ter my knowledge. They was much with Griggsy, an' then all of a sudden, he went out o' sight. See?"

Nickol had been listening attentively. He had been studying Plum Gilder, too. The latter had seen about fifteen years of life. If he had ever been handsome he had outgrown it. He had a face devoid of symmetrical features, and a liberal crop of freckles did not add to his good looks.

He was dressed in whole clothes, but they were of the cheapest kind, and the fit thereof was simply agonizing to the critical eye.

A typical boy of the streets he seemed to be, and he was quite a curiosity, in himself, to the man from Rusty Gulch.

Plain as he was he had an honest face, unless Nerve Nickol was wholly at sea in his estimate.

Having studied his companion and de-

cided on him in this favorable way the Westerner was disposed to meet him very frankly.

"Tell me just what you know about this matter," he requested. "I may be able to make it worth your while to help me in this."

"You kin have all I know about it," mister," was the reply. "You see, I am a feller who makes it his biz ter keep his eyes open, an' the result o' this is that I see a good many things that other folks never would see. I hev long known Walton an' Tony Pierson, an' I knowed they was sharpers from the ground up. How Walton gets his livin' I can't say, though I do know he is a sharper, but Tony is a race-track fiend, an' gives 'tips' an' all that sort o' rubbish. All at once I see them have Griggsy in tow. I see he was a very different sort of a chap, an' I suspected he was doomed ter be bled by them in some way. I determined ter watch the whole crowd, but my eyes won't look seven ways ter once. The result was that I reckon I didn't see all that was goin' on. Ef Griggsy went out o' sight mysterious, I didn't see it done."

"Why do you think he went that way?"

"Ever hear of Peggy Benner?"

"No."

"She's a jim-hickey!" declared Plum, with enthusiasm.

"Friend o' yourn?"

"Yes, we're engaged ter be married."

"You be?"

"Yes."

"Thunder! ain't you rushin' things a bit, my young friend?"

"Peggy thinks not, an' I reckon she's the one most concerned," replied Plum, with dignity.

"By thunder! you're right. If you marry her she will be the biggest stockholder in the firm. Well, where does Peggy come in?"

"She thinks she heard Griggsy done up."

"Ah! how is that?"

"She lives down on West street, she does, with her old man, who is Dick Benner, an' one o' them who hung around Griggsy so much. Peggy never goes ter sleep without her eyes wide open, an' what she don't see ain't worth seein'."

"No doubt she is a corker, but let me hear just what she knows of this whole business and then I shall be so much the wiser."

"It ain't much, but it's to the p'int. One night, an' the night after Griggsy was last seen here, Peggy's old gent posted her off ter bed too early ter suit her wishes. Now, old Dick Benner ain't no angel, an' Peggy was aweer o' the fack, an' when she got thus ordered it dawned on her that there was an objick in it all, an', bein' mad at the old man, she set out ter play the spy on him."

"Good for her!"

"Oh! Peggy has a great head."

"What did she see?"

"She won't say posityve, but she believes fully that she see an' heard a man swatted with a slung-shot an' then carried an' dumped inter the river."

"Believes! Don't she know, one way or the other?"

"Wal, you see she heard the blow struck—no more—an' she surely see somethin' that looked like a man carried ter the pier and dropped over. That she will swear ter, boss."

"Where was this assault committed?"

"Jest outside the house, as ef they lay in wait fer their victim an' then smashed him."

"I shall have to see this young woman."

"You kin, mister," replied Plum Gilder, with dignity.

"I trust your engagement won't prevent you from letting other gentlemen talk with her?" seriously asked the sport.

"Wal, as fer that, I hev thrashed two fellers fer bein' too sociable with her, but ef the contrack is duly made by me, thar ain't no objection ter her talkin' with other gents," frankly explained Plum.

"You have a large soul, Mr. Gilder, an' may you live long and prosper. But, see here! Why should these men want to kill Epsom Griggs?"

"I don't know, but my knowledge o' their ways o' doin' biz leads me ter think they see a dollar in it, an' went fer the dollar an' Griggsy. Don't you know why 'twas done?"

"No."

"D'ye want ter?"

"Yes."

"Mister, why can't we go inter this thing an' find out?" and Plum's eyes suddenly lighted up brightly. "Ef there is any one thing I like ter do et is ter elocidate myst'ries, an' I guess we two would make a rattlin' good team."

"Then you will help?"

"Bet yer socks I will!"

"Plum, I'm with you. I'll admit I have a very considerable interest in this case, and I want to know what Epsom's disappearance meant. How can we get at it?"

"I kin take ye to a place where Tony Pierson an' Dick Benner spend much o' their time, an' as even Benner don't know me by sight, there ain't no danger they will suspect we are pipin' them."

"Pard, put it there! Into this thing we go, if it is a blind lead. We'll find out about Epsom or have an explanation why, by thunder!"

"Good fer you, old boss!"

As Nickol spoke he had leaned forward and grasped Plum's hand, and the young man returned the clasp with fervor. There was, indeed, more warmth on both sides than circumstances seemed to made necessary, but this was owing to the fact that they had taken a mutual fancy to each other, and they were persons not disposed to act coldly when there was no need of it.

They separated with an agreement to meet later on, and Nerve Nickol took his way back to his own hotel. He was unusually serious and thoughtful.

"This is discouraging!" he murmured, as he went. "If Griggs has come to grief, where do I stand? I almost wish, now, that I had let him know of me, for it might have been the means of his being taken care of. He has been rash, somehow, I fear, though where these men mentioned by the boy come into the game I don't see."

He meditated, and then added:

"If Griggs has failed, perhaps I have made a mistake in approaching Abram Hamilton as I have."

It was a significant comment, for it showed that the sport had some secret motive in making Hamilton's acquaintance.

What could it be?

Shortly after dark the man from Rusty Gulch went to keep his appointment with Plum Gilder, and that person did not disappoint him.

"Glad to meet ye ag'in, mister," Plum observed. "How's yer courage?"

"Fair. Why? Is there anything to be frightened about?"

"Wal, this is a trip where 'most anything is likely ter happen."

"Don't prevent it, pard. A little fight to break up the monotony of life is always pleasant. Out in Rusty Gulch we often quarrel just for the fun of the thing. Heave ahead, and the more excitement, the better."

CHAPTER VIII.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAD.

STRAIGHT to a doorway on a certain street Plum Gilder conducted Nerve Nickol. The latter read an inscription over the entrance.

"The Moose-head Club," he repeated. "What kind of a den is it?"

"Club house," Plum answered.

"What caliber?"

"Forty-two fer fun, an' about six fer honesty," drily replied the guide. "Still, et ain't a dive."

"You expect to find some of our friends in there, eh?"

"No, I don't, by jinks! I don't admit that Eg Walton an' his fry is any friends' o' mine," Plum said, with emphasis. "This here club is a resort o' sportin' men, and Eg, Tony Pierson an' others herd here. I guess we'll find them, so in we go. Don't be thinkin' there will be a racket, fer I don't think there will. You'll see a place half-club an' half-theater, where sports make free an' easy, but they don't pretend ter all know each other, so there don't seem no reason fer trouble."

"Heave ahead, Plum."

Nerve Nickol did not care whether there was to be a fight or not, but he had asked because he wished to know what he was getting into before he went.

They entered, and Plum led the way upstairs.

There they found a room of considerable size. It was lined with tables, and around these men were seated with beer glasses before them. Other men were standing, and the result of the latest entrances proved the correctness of Plum's assertion that no one would pay attention to them when they made their appearance.

Nerve Nickol knew but little about the ways and men of the East, but he did not need much coaching to understand the character of those he saw assembled there.

What he could not tell himself was made plain by his guide. Plum seemed to be a regular encyclopedia of information, and he called men by their names in describing them to Nickol, mentioning their calling as that of gamblers, horse-fanciers, general sharpers and politicians—he seemed to mix all these in one—and Nickol was made to see just the kind of gathering it was.

"Now, there's Tony Pierson," added Plum. "He's a high-roller in his own opinion, and kin do the race-track act in great shape. Gives tips for twenty-five cents, an' fools put up their cash on his judgment. Ginerally lose their stuff, too."

"Hard crowd, isn't it?"

"You bet."

"Are they handy with their guns?"

"Much as they dare to be."

"They ought to go out to Rusty Gulch. That's the greatest place in the world for a good man with the shooting-irons. A poor shot has no show, though, for some of our artists in that line would drop him before you could say 'Hands up!'"

"There's Walton, who is Tony's chum."

"Ah!"

"Keep your eye on them two fellers."

"I will, assuredly."

"You might as wal watch out so's not ter git yer pocket picked. I don't think there is any danger of it in here, fer they meet ter behave wal, but you can't always tell, ye see. Any one of them would do ye up fer ten cents ef things was right. It's a gallus old gang, mister, now you bet!"

"You seem well posted on them."

"Nick, I ain't swung around the city o' New York all these years without gettin' my peepers open. I'm an old stager."

For a beardless youth Plum was wise in his own opinion, but it was not conceit. He had knocked around from pillar to post until his age was to be counted by experience not by years.

Plum and Nick sat down at one of the tables, and had no one to molest or scan them. With others seated, and still others standing, it was not a scene where anybody had time, chance or wish to spy upon his neighbor.

It was a new and interesting scene to Nick. He was ready to believe all he had been told of the adults of the party, and among the beardless members he could well conceive that most of them were candidates for State's Prison.

Finally a man appeared on the stage at the further side of the room and called the audience to order.

He stated that there would be the usual monthly performance, and that all would be led by a song-and-dance artist. This feature was given and followed by others.

Plum and Nickol were seated near Walton, and not far from Tony Pierson. They watched these persons closely, but, naturally, saw but little to reward them. The two sharpers did not sit together, and did not seem to have business of importance to attend to.

The evening's entertainment wore on until the person in charge of the stage came forward with this announcement:

"We will now have Mr. James Bissett, who is admitted to be one of the most noted spiritualist performers in the country. The wonders he has performed have astonished the people and awakened the admiration of the press. He explains his unusual success by stating that he is more than commonly in accord with the spirits of the departed, and thus has marked advantages for showing us the forms, and letting us hear the voices of those who have passed to the spirit land. Gentlemen, this is Mr. Bissett."

A stout, florid faced man advanced to the

front of the stage and said a few words, after which he proceeded to do his marvels.

He had a cabinet, and produced the shades of men and women with ease and skill. Of his watchers some were severely practical, but others believed fully in spiritualism, and he found ample food for his work and for credulity.

Shades were produced which were generally recognized—or so those present declared—as the ghostly substitutes of those they had known in life—sporting men of all sorts.

He created a good deal of interest and enthusiasm, but Nerve Nickol yawned drearily.

"If this sort of monkey business is to go on we had better skip, Plum," he said. "I don't believe in ghosts, and this fellow can't stir my blood with his delusions."

"Le's see et out, Nick. I agree that the biz is all a fraud, fer I don't believe no spirit kin come back ter this life, but the tricks is done right slick an' is rather pleasant ter look at. We don't see ghosts every day, mister," replied Plum, so Nick stayed.

Finally, as the manager of the ghosts was busy, a "spirit" came out of the cabinet unannounced. The manager looked at him in the dim light with an appearance of surprise.

"Who art thou?" he asked.

"I am a disembodied shade," was the sepulchral reply.

"I did not summon you."

"I came because I could not rest."

"Whence comest thou?"

"From the land of the grave."

"Why art thou here?"

"I would have my bones found and buried."

"Has not this been done?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I died a violent death, and none who would help me if they could know where I died."

"Who were you in life?"

"My name was Terrill, and I was a detective."

The name conveyed nothing to most of those present, but Nerve Nickol, sitting so near to Egbert Walton, saw that person make a great start, as if he had received some sudden shock.

The head of the Fancy Five started at the alleged ghost with wide-open eyes, and for the first time seemed to find the performance of the evening well worth paying heed to.

"Where and when did you die?" asked the spiritualist, of his ghost.

"That I am forbid to tell from the world I am now in," the ghost answered.

"Where are your unburied bones?"

"Neither can I tell that."

"Then how are they to be buried?"

"They must be found."

"Give us directions and we promise to do so, if it will add to your rest in the other world."

"There are two men in this room who could find the bones without any direction," replied the phantom, seriously. "It is for them to give you the clue, and if they do not do it I shall haunt them. I cannot, will not rest until this is done."

"Do the two men to whom you refer now hear you ask this favor?"

"Yes."

Plum Gilder nudged Nick. Both were looking at Walton, and they did not fail to see that he was agitated. His face, usually so strong, now seemed weak and unsteady, and Plum whispered:

"I don't see the p'int, but the ghost has got in a staggerer!"

"Do you really think Walton knows of this?"

"Sure!"

No more could be said on account of the continuing stage-talk.

"Perhaps," the operator of shades had remarked, "these men will do as you request."

"It will save them a good deal of trouble."

"Is there more you would ask of them?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

Slowly and mournfully replied the phantom:

"I would like to know where Epsom Griggs is."

Now it was Nerve Nickol's turn to start. He had not been prepared for anything of the kind, and it struck him forcibly.

"Who is Epsom Griggs?" asked the questioner.

"He is a man who has gone out of sight mysteriously, and where he has gone is to be explainable by the two men who know where my bones are, I think. Griggs must be found, or trouble will ensue. The two men are hearing all I say. Bid them see to it that my wishes are attended to, for it is a matter of vital importance. I cannot rest where I am, and they, alone, can succor me from my dread abode of death. Let them do this and all will be well, but if they fail I will look for Epsom Griggs, and this might not please them. This is a warning; let them remember. I go!"

The phantom retreated toward the cabinet, whereupon the spiritualist cried:

"Stay!"

"I go!"

So repeated the phantom, and then it disappeared in the cabinet.

The spiritualist made an excited gesture.

"Turn up the lights!" he exclaimed.

"There is something about this even I cannot understand. Up with the lights!"

CHAPTER IX.

DANGER!

THE assistants on the stage obeyed the last order, and the whole hall became light once more. The spiritualist advanced to the footlights and added:

"Gentlemen, I do not understand this. That the being you have seen was a spirit is certain, but it came as none ever came to me before. It literally forced itself upon us, and I do not comprehend the matter."

"Ask your assistant fakes," suggested an unbeliever in ghosts.

"There is no fraud about this," declared the manager. "I will defy any one to show that I have ever been guilty of any imposition on the public, and I know no more about this than you do. The spirit came uncalled for and unexpected. I can only surmise there is some great wrong that should be righted. If there is, as has been alleged, any one in the audience who ever heard of a detective named Terrill, or of this Epsom Griggs, will he come forward?"

Again Plum Gilder touched Nick.

"See Walton and Tony hustle!" he exclaimed, but those named did not hustle in the least.

Silence followed the request, and all of the spiritualist's calls of like nature resulted as poorly in results.

When he saw that it was not to be obeyed, he went on with the show, but to some there the charm had departed.

Tony finally worked around to Walton's side, while Plum, seeing the object, made a move to get within hearing. Under cover of the general noise, the race-track sharp whispered to his ally—whispered, but not so lightly but what Plum heard all:

"What do you make of this, Walt?"

"We are in danger!" was the quick answer.

"Was that a real spirit?"

"Are you fool enough to believe that?"

"Well, I never have believed in ghosts—"

"Don't begin now. Only the ignorant take any stock in such nonsense, so let us drop that. We are menaced!"

"How?"

"With exposure."

"By whom?"

"Terrill could not have been working alone. This is a blow from an ally of his, though why any one should be fool enough to give himself away thus I do not know. Be silent on the subject now; I will see you later on, when we go out."

Walton was duly discreet, but Tony looked ill pleased to drop the subject then!

"You may be right, but I've heard folks swear there is such a thing as spirits—"

"Drop it, Tony; you are talking to a man of sense. No spirit rubbish for me."

Tony obeyed, but the two men sat in silence which did not seem to be that of happy meditation. Plum returned to Nick as soon as was safe, and made his report.

"I am not surprised," remarked the sport.

"There is a rich haul in Walton and Tony, and we will make it."

"What about the monkey biz on the stage?"

"Walton is a keen, shrewd fellow, and he is situated right to make guesses. He says all that was done by an ally of the man Terrill, and though we may be in the dark, he ought to be able to make a good hit at the facts."

"Nick, this case jest gits me where my zeal sings loud."

"Especially as Epsom Griggs is in it, eh?"

"Jes' so, by mighty!"

"We will shadow Walton and Tony."

"When?"

Nickol was about to reply when the two men mentioned rose to leave the hall. The man from Rusty Gulch touched his companion.

"Come with me," he directed.

The members of the Fancy Five went out, and as close after them as was prudent followed the spies. Walton and his friend did not leave the building, but went to the lower floor, where a saloon did a rushing business. They entered a small private compartment, and the chase seemed lost, but Plum was not to be fooled thus. Another place of the kind was next to it, and the street boy gave his order:

"Nick, hustle in thar and call fer suthin' strong. We must hold this den an' listen ter their voices over the partition. See!—it don't go up more'n eight feet."

The plan was carried out, and the wishes of the spies were furthered by the fact that there was a small crevice in the partition which enabled them to see as well as to hear.

Walton and Tony were drinking whisky with vim.

"Let's have another round," suggested Tony.

"This is enough," replied Walton.

"But I want to settle my nerves."

"The man who needs whisky to settle his nerves is a weak fool," returned Walton, bluntly. "Let the devil's weapon alone. Now, as to this thing we have heard—"

"Are you sure it is not Terrill's ghost?"

"Pierson, if you talk such confounded rubbish you and I will have to part. I won't hear of any ghost babbling."

"Well, lead off, Walt."

"We have to-night had proof that we are marked by somebody or something. We have had the best of evidence that the secret we thought so well laid is a walking menace. Somebody knows, or suspects, that we were concerned in Terrill's taking off. Now, who is that somebody?"

"Can it be another detective?"

"That is my fear."

"Then why doesn't he come right at us?"

"True. It seems to me no sensible detective would thus warn us."

"Then there was that talk about Epsom Griggs."

"We are suspected of putting him out of the way."

"Yes."

"At least, we are innocent of that."

"Yes. Tony, are you sure you saw Epsom go into old Hamilton's house, that night?"

Walton gazed almost suspiciously at his confederate, but Tony was prompt with his answer:

"I'll swear to it."

"Then what became of Epsom?"

"Walt, do you suppose old Abram has put Griggs out of the way?"

"A deep inquiry. I would not have thought him capable of it, but something came of that interview with Epsom which has knocked us out. Did he bribe Epsom to quit, or did he kill him?"

"Griggs wanted all belonging to him."

"Yes, but Hamilton may have offered him enough so that Epsom thought it better to take it than to go for the whole and have to divide with us, you see."

"You don't talk as if you believed in this."

"Tony, I do not believe in it. Hamilton likes money well enough so he would, I think, stick to all he had. If this is true we must look for another explanation of how Epsom disappeared so suddenly after you escorted him to Hamilton's door and bade him go and get the cash."

"His spirit did not come to light, to-night."

"That is not proof that he lives."

"Do you think him dead?" again asked Tony.

Walton meditated a good while before replying, but finally returned:

"It would not surprise me, singular as I would have thought it a little while before this, if old Hamilton had killed him. Epsom went into the Hamilton house. He was not seen to come out alive, and deepest mystery hangs over him now. Where is he, if alive? But this is not what we have to think of now. Let us speak of Terrill."

"A nasty subject!" declared Tony, with a shiver.

"Somebody knows that the detective was after us. Do they also know that we—"

"Did him up."

"Hush! hush!—not so loud!" cautioned Walton.

"I did not speak in a dangerous tone."

"Perhaps you didn't; guilt sees and hears many things imaginative. Now, I do not see that we can do any good indulging in speculation. What we want is action, and that will show us who and what we have run up against, to-night."

"And the plan?"

"To look into this spiritualist, who must be in the plot."

"Good!"

"The president of our club must tell us about the spiritualist, and when we have him located we will see what he is."

"Your way is the right one. Once found, can we win?"

"Tony, the Fancy Five are in this to make it a fight to a finish."

"Bravo!"

Tony and Walton clasped hands, and there was no denying that it was a strong union. No simple matter was it to beat them out.

"I am going home," added Walton, presently. "I want to be alone to think this over."

"I'll go, too."

They left the saloon.

"Shall we follow?" Nerve Nickol asked of Plum.

"Why should we? I know where they live, and we may make a mess of it by tryin' ter dog them jest when they are so suspicious."

"Solid sense. We will leave them alone. By the way, I want to look at this den and its frequenters more particularly before we go. Your Eastern ways are new to me, and I want to size them up. I'm a wild and woolly boss from Rusty Gulch, but I'm open to knowledge, and New York is the oyster I want to open."

"I'll help ye do et, by jinks!" declared Plum. "You'll find New York the richest oyster ye ever did open, too. There ain't no other place like et on the surface o' the globe. New York is a cuckoo, Nick!"

"Yes, but not so very much ahead of Rusty Gulch."

They passed out into the main room of the saloon and Nick stood gazing at the crowd that was thronging the bar. He did not find the men so very much different from those of his own loved home, but the absence of weapons made him think it a bit slow.

"Do you ever play poker, stranger?"

The inquiry came in a weak little voice from near Nick's elbow. He turned and saw a man like the voice—weak in all respects, especially as to honor. This was Clarence Allyne, but Nick did not know it.

"Do I ever play poker?" he repeated, slowly.

"That's what I asked you," briskly answered Clarence.

"Well, I have, now and then."

"From the West?"

"From the wild and woolly West, sir."

"I suppose we play about the same game?"

"Very likely."

"Would you like to while away a few hours?"

"I am a whole team on the 'while.' My poker is said by experts to be ragged on the bias, but I like to try a hack now and then. Why, yes, I don't mind if I do play for awhile. Anything to pass the time away, you know. That is my motto."

Clarence looked pleased, and cards were obtained from the saloon-keeper.

They sat down at one of the tables in the reading-room, and the playing began.

"My runnin' mate is in fer it," murmured Plum Gilder, "an' I hope he will make his mark. Durned ef I don't think poker is the stupidest game a man o' hoss sense ever tried ter play, but ef Nick is bound ter go in. I hope he won't flunk. They deal. How will et go?"

CHAPTER X.

NICK MAKES HIS MARK.

CLARENCE ALLYNE was not the best player in New York, but he thought he was, and did really have considerable skill and luck. Poker had been the ruin of him, for he had never started on the downward road until he took to the mysteries of that game.

Now, deeming himself an expert, he expected to defeat this long-haired person from the West.

Cards ran poorly for some time, and one pair was the winner through several hands, but there was a change in this respect, and the drift in the opposite direction was so marked that those among the loungers who came to look on remained to see the singularly good hands that came out. These were about equally divided, and for a long while there was no radical change in the possession of the funds of the gamblers.

Plum Gilder looked on with growing dissatisfaction.

"I dunno about Mr. Nick," he commented. "He's my runnin' mate an' I'll stand by him, but I don't jest like ter hev a mate o' mine set down in any sech den ez this an' juggle the cards. Does he see what is around us?"

There was no good way of asking the question of Nick, but it was one which might well have occupied Nick's thoughts. Those who were standing by were tough-looking citizens. Some of them were poorly dressed and some the reverse, but all had the stamp of iniquity, unless Plum sized them up wrong, and he was not likely to make many mistakes on the men of Gotham.

Nerve Nickol, however, regarded them, when he looked up from his cards, with benign unconcern. Possibly life in Rusty Gulch had made him accustomed to hard looking faces.

Clarence grew thoughtful. Ha had a good hand, but Nick was "raising" him so steadily that he did not feel sure of his position. Was his opponent well fixed with cards, or was he bluffing?

The city gambler could not tell, for the Western man had a face which told no tales, and his manner was always that of cool unconcern.

"I raise you ten," muttered Clarence.

"See you, and go you ten better," quoth Nick, calmly.

"Confound it, man, how much longer is this going on?" demanded Clarence, nervously.

"I don't know—what is your limit?"

"I'll raise you ten, anyhow."

"See you, and go you ten better."

Clarence could have flung his cards at the sport from Rusty Gulch, so angry was he. He could not understand the Gulchite in the least, and he wished himself well out of the game. Anger made him reckless, now. He resolved, under the impulse of the moment, to play boldly.

"Raise you fifty!" he declared.

"See you, and go you ten better," calmly replied Nick.

It was maddening to Clarence. There was now over three hundred dollars at stake, and he dared not add to the risk. Covering the last raise he gasped:

"I call you!"

There was no trace of excitement in Nick's manner as he promptly revealed his cards. Clarence looked, and then something like a groan escaped his lips. He had lost, and the loss made him practically a beggar. Play longer he could not, and he sprung up from his seat.

"Never mind; you'll get it back," remarked a rough-looking spectator, reassuringly.

"I am done!" declared Clarence.

"What! will you give up so?"

"Yes."

"Ain't you got no pluck?"

"Fool! my money is all gone!"

Many of those present heard this dialogue, but they did not know what was a fact—that the rough man who had turned counselor was Josh Martin, the fifth member of the Fancy Five combination. Josh followed Clarence out of the room, and then another man challenged Nerve Nickol to play.

"All right," replied Nick, coolly. "I never throw anything over my shoulder."

"What do you mean by that?"

"An off-hand remark."

"Sounded as if you thought you had a snap."

"Not at all. I dare say my luck will turn, now."

But it did not turn, and, as Nick had obtained an extremely plucky opponent, the gaping crowd was given sight of the biggest kind of poker-playing they had ever seen. Big risks prevailed, and though the newcomer was the boldest kind of a gambler, he went down. It was, however, a great exhibition all around, and the skill with which he covered his headlong work was such that it often looked as if the calm man from the West was to be a sure victim.

"Played against fate all the while," observed a spectator, when the game was over and Nick was the winner by two hundred dollars, "and bluffed every time. That sport is game!"

From that hour Nickol was well known in New York, and always with the same title. He had played poker in the swell atmosphere of his aristocratic hotel and in the low saloon of the humble street, and men of all ranks in sporting life knew the long-haired Gulchite thenceforth, and united in saying he was "game" to the core.

Plum Gilder was in ecstasies. He believed poker to be a stupid game, but that his "running mate" should win so decisively was joy to his heart.

As they prepared to go he whispered to Nick:

"Keep yer cash wal out o' sight."

"Why?"

"Ain't ye judge enough o' phizerognomy fer ter see there is men here who would as soon kill ye fer that cash ez ter eat?"

"Why, of course there are."

"You take et cool."

"Why not? I lived in Rusty Gulch, and it's common there for such things to happen."

"Guess yer old miner town is wal named," drily commented Plum, "but ef you know the ropes so wal I will only say that that is jest the caliber o' the gents you see here. Keep yer eye open, same as in Rusty Gulch."

The warning had not been received lightly by Nick, nor had he been oblivious to the character of his companions. He, however, carried the same revolver which had defended him in Rusty Gulch, and he felt able to look out for himself.

The two friends were passing toward the front of the saloon, to use the door there, when they were accosted by a boy.

"Closed up there, on account of its bein' so late," he remarked. "Take the side-door."

The latter was the same way that Nick and Plum had come in, and they did not see any objection to the plan. Accordingly, they bent their steps that way.

Plum's mind wandered. He was so elated at the success of his ally that he forgot his own warning, and scarcely heeded their progress as he followed Nick. The sport pushed the door of the little entry open and swung back the outer door.

Then he had a view of something startling.

To the vision of the sport suddenly appeared the head and shoulders of a man, and in the hand of the stranger was a knife, long-bladed and bright. Brief the view thus vouchsafed, for the man did not remain stationary.

Like a panther he leaped upon the sport.

The noise aroused Plum Gilder, and as he looked up he was amazed and startled by the sight. He saw the knife in mid-air and knew it was the purpose of the holder to strike to Nick's heart.

There could be no doubt of that, and there was about as little doubt that he would succeed—so it looked to Plum.

"Murder!" cried the boy.

The knife fell!

Like one in a trance the street boy watch-

ed the fall of the blade, and he looked to see Nick pierced, as if by a resistless force.

But he saw more! He saw the sport throw up his own hand and catch the wrist of the assassin as it fell, and this arrested the blow wholly.

Quick witted and decisive was the assassin, and he no sooner saw his plot frustrated than he tried again. With a fierce exclamation he tried to wrest his arm free, but the result showed he had to deal with one as resolute as himself.

Maintaining that hold, Nick swung him around, and a moment later, there was a crash as the assassin fell heavily to the floor. A quick kick sent the knife flying away, and then the sport's foot was planted on his would-be assassin's breast.

"Here we are again!" quoth Nick, cheerfully.

"Thunder! it's Clarence's hanger-on!" exclaimed Plum.

It was, indeed, Josh Martin, but he was not the chipper Josh of old. Burly ruffian that he was he had been severely used, and it had jarred his system and broken his courage for the time being. Angry he was, but there was more of fright than anything else as he lay under his conqueror's heel.

The boy who had directed Nick and Plum to the side door had been sent by Josh, the message about the front door being false, and Josh had planned to do all without the other frequenters of the resort being any the wiser, but the downfall of his plans had also revealed everything to those outsiders.

All crowded forward and took a good look at the fallen bully.

"What is it?" asked one of them.

"A man-killer," explained another.

"Is that what you call him?" inquired Nick.

"Didn't he try to kill you?"

"Yes."

"I thought so."

"Trying and doing are two different things, my friend. Why, this skunk would not harm a flea—because the flea would get away with him. He, a fighter?"

"Ef he is he ain't in your class, pard!" declared Plum Gilder, proudly.

"I ain't tried ter kill nobody," remonstrated the fallen member of the Fancy Five.

"What was it, then?"

"I jest reached in to—to—to—"

"Say it quick!" advised Nick, with sarcasm.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERICUS WARNING.

THE rough and ready frequenters of the resort had a mind for humor, and the way Nick answered the stammering bully so appealed to them that there was a general laugh at Josh's expense.

"I didn't mean ter do harm ter nobody," growled Josh, directly.

"Plum, hand me that knife," directed Nick, and the boy obeyed.

The sport held up the glittering blade.

"Do you call it no harm to try and run this into a fellow?" he inquired drily.

"I didn't try ter—"

"That's a lie!" cried Plum Gilder, promptly.

"It was a mistake," declared Josh, shifting his line of defense.

"Oh! come off!" cried Nick. "You were with the little scamp I first played poker with, and you looked as black as a thunder-cloud when I won. You thought to get your money, or his, as it may be, back by doing me up. Right there you made a mistake, for I am your master."

"Ef I was on my feet—"

With a quick motion and a fine exhibition of strength Nick set him up with one hand.

"You are on your feet, sir. What now?"

Josh lost color. The sport was before him, empty-handed, but the ruffian lacked the courage to touch him.

"Proceed!" added Nick.

Josh swallowed an imaginary lump and then replied:

"I am done!"

Joshua cast a longing glance toward the door, and Nick understood it so well that he tersely directed:

"Get out!"

The Fancy Five representative brightened but Plum Gilder grew very disconsolate of look.

"Say, Nick, you ain't goin' ter let him off, he ye?"

"Yes, I want no more of him. Skip!"

The last word was to Josh, and that person needed no urging. He beat a fresh retreat, and was gone with creditable speed. Out of the building he went, and then Nick turned to his comrade.

"I'm sleepy, Plum. Let's go home and get a little rest."

Without another word to any one he was walking out, but he had made one admirer there who was not content with that.

"Wait a bit," he requested. "Mister, I've seen you play poker and fight, and I allow you are about as game a sport as I ever saw. Barkeeper, set them up for the whole crowd, and I will pay for what is drunk to the health of this gent!"

This suggestion met with universal approval, not only because most of those present were delighted to get a drink free of cost, but because, with the enthusiastic speaker, they now held Nick in great esteem. His health was drunk with much enthusiasm, and he was invited to call often and see them further. Then the man from Rusty Gulch and Plum went out and wandered on down the street.

"Nick, you're a corker!" declared the boy.

"Oh! that was nothing," was the careless reply.

"His nibs thought it was something when you had him under yer heel, by jinks! Say, when you go back ter Rusty Gulch jest let me go along, ef you kin teach me the art o' doin' things that way, will ye?"

"We'll see."

"But you ain't done here," added Plum, thoughtfully, "an' I guess you'll need all yer nerve afore it's a finished game. That feller would hev killed ye ef he could."

"No doubt. His dapper little colleague was a hard loser, and they thought to get their money back. They did not, though. But let us drop them. What about Walton and Tony Pierson?"

"Hard customers, by jinks!"

"If we are to believe the last talk we heard them have they are as ignorant as we are of what has become of Epsom Griggs."

"Fact?"

"Do you believe them?"

"I did, yes."

"Same here. Then we are to suppose that they saw Epsom enter Hamilton's house, but never come out. How was that?"

"You remember they guessed on two chances—has Epsom skipped, or has Hamilton done him up?"

"Yes."

The sport walked on for some distance in silence, and then he added in a meditative tone.

"If Hamilton is a murderer he is not the kind of a man I had supposed him. Mean and miserly he undoubtedly is, but I did not give him credit for actual crime. Still, one never can tell. The murderous instinct breaks out in queer ways and places, and they may be right in their second surmise. Be that as it may, we will go on with our search and find the explanation of all this—you are with me, ain't you, Plum?"

"With ye?" cried the boy. "Wal, you bet I am, jest ez long ez my uppers hold on. Yesser, count on me, sure pop!"

The next day Walton and Tony were in the Varick street house, engaged in smoking and, one would say, doing some very serious thinking. While thus occupied the servant appeared and announced that a man wished to see them. John Ross was the name he had sent, and though they did not recognize it they let him come in.

"It may be some one who wants tips on the races," Tony had suggested, with an eye to the main chance.

John Ross came in; a plain-looking man who wore rough clothes, and looked a little embarrassed.

"Gents, I've come on a queer errand," he remarked.

"Spit it out," directed Walton.

"I am messenger for a man, but he was a stranger to me and I do not know how far it

is best to give the message he sent. Still, he paid me to deliver it—"

"Then go right ahead," ordered Walton.

"But it seems a bit delicate to me—"

"Oh! heave ahead!"

"Well, this man came to me on the street and hired me—"

"Tell the message at once. Confound it! don't beat around the bush so long."

"All right, sir; the message was this. He told me to begin by asking you as follows: 'Where is Terrill buried?'"

Walton and Tony roused from their semi-indifference with a start. If they had been weary of the interview they were so no longer.

"What's that?" cried Walton, when he could command his voice.

"That was the question," replied the visitor.

"Who told you to ask it?"

"The stranger."

"But who was he?"

"I know no more than the dead. He gave no name, and went away as soon as it was over."

"And was that all?"

"All? Well, I should say not! He told me to ask next: 'Is it true that murder will out?'"

Out on Tony's face oozed perspiration not called there by the temperature. He looked at Walton and saw that the bold leader of the Fancy Five was pale and worried. Truly, there was reason why both of them should be troubled by these remarkable speeches.

Walton made a struggle for self-possession and then cried:

"You are lying to us; you do not come as the agent for anybody; but on your own hook."

"I swear to you that it is just as I say. Look into my record and you will find I am a plain man. I am a cab-driver by profession, and I engineer schemes against no one. I agreed to do this job because I was offered good pay for it, but I want you to understand I have no other connection with the case."

"Why should this man send you here with such messages?"

"Just what I do not know."

"Is there more?"

"Yes, and here they are: 'Does death end all—for the living?' That is one, and here's another: 'Has Epsom gone the same way as Terrill?' Those are the questions I was told to ask you, gents."

Back to the events at the club entertainment flashed the minds of the listeners. To each it appeared that this new attack was due to the same man.

"Go on!" repeated Walton, in a hard voice.

"That is all, but I have a letter here which I was to give you after the verbal messages."

Ross passed the letter over and would have gone away, but he was ordered to remain. This he did with readiness which indicated that he had nothing to fear.

Walton opened the letter with haste. He believed the doubt which hovered over all these matters would be dispelled, and they would know to whom the attacks were due. This is what he found written in a bold, handsome hand:

"TO WALTON AND PIERSON:—

"Mythology says that when we die we are rowed across the river Styx by a phantom boatman named Charon. This being we never see until all is over with us.

"The subscriber begs leave to state that he is a detective who is much interested in your case, but, like Charon, he will not be seen until all is over with you in the case referred to. He will, however, be heard from in the meanwhile, and the days and the hours will be unknown to you until each message comes.

"Terrill and Griggs played each his part while alive, and they have left a memory behind them which will not die. Nameless and unknown though their graves may be they will be heard from later on. Murder will out, and though the guilty cover their tracks ever so well they will fall in the midst of their career.

"Man is of few days and full of trouble. You are not exempt from the common lot of the human race. You shall hear from me, for I shall be all-active, but you will never

see me until you reach the Styx of your crime. Then you will know the identity of the detective who here signs himself simply as

CHARON."

Egbert Walton was a man of courage, and though he was frightened, in reality, by this letter, he had been allowed time to regain his coolness, and he faced the messenger defiantly.

"You say you do not know who gave you this?"

"I do not."

"Describe him."

"I can do it but poorly. He was a tall, thin-formed old man, with a big white beard, but he came to me when I was in a dark place, and I really know but little of his looks."

"Have you more to tell?"

"No."

"Before you go out of our sight you will have to prove you are the humble cabman you claim to be."

"Willingly. Come with me, and you shall have the proof. I want to prove that this all comes from a man as much a mystery to me as to you."

CHAPTER XII.

THE FATAL PIER.

DARKNESS was falling in the city, and in West street the bustle of day had given place to the gloom which night throws on a matter-of-fact and dingy locality. From a cross street came two persons who paused upon reaching West street.

"Nick, do ye see that palatial hovel of two small stories, over yender?" asked the foremost.

"I do, Plum."

"That is where the noble Miss Peggy Benner lives. You stay here, an' I will shuffle my feet that way an' bring her highness on. See?"

"Plain as Rusty Gulch mud. Go, Plum, and bring your adored one."

"Promise me one thing."

"What is that?"

"That you won't fall in love with her. Peggy an' me are engaged to undergo the operation of matrimony when we get the price, but women ain't got that strict integrity an' firmness o' purpose which us men hev, an', as you are of a rather dashin' figger, she might desert the old flame an' fall so deep in love with you that she couldn't be reached with a forty foot pole by Plum Gilder, Esquire."

"Your lady-love will be such to the end for all of me. I doubt not that she has all the attractions you claim for her, but I would not go back on a friend like you."

"Nick, you are a brick, b'jinks! I like yer style. Wal, so-long, an' I'll hev Peggy here in a shake."

Plum wandered down the street and soon disappeared in Dick Benner's house. Nick watched anxiously, for there was danger that some of the gang would be in and prevent Peggy from coming out, but when Plum reappeared he had the young girl with him.

Plum brought her to his ally and gave a due introduction.

"Now, you two jump right inter yer confab," he advised.

"Not here; it's too public," demanded Peggy. "Go down on the pier an' we'll hev it all ter ourselves. This week there ain't any watchman there, an' we kin talk as much as we please. We don't want any old grandmothers or crooks meddlin' with us, I reckon."

The breezy freshness of Peggy's style impressed Nick well. He could see enough of her, even in the dim light, to distinguish the fact that she had a bright, keen face, and he took to her immediately.

Down on the pier they went, and, with the water of the old North River whispering at their feet and the lights of the stream flashing everywhere, they came to business at once.

"I think Plum has made known a part of what I want," said Nick.

"He talked enough to tell all about the discovery of America by Columbus, but he didn't seem ter say much, after all."

"Now, Peggy!" remonstrated Plum.

"Men are more talk than biz," added Miss Benner.

"Strikes me you kinder like ter hear me talk!" retorted Plum.

"I did, until I got tired o' you."

"Say, who wrote me a letter this mornin', askin' me ter take her to a picnic—"

"Now, you hush!" commanded Peggy, blushing, whereupon Plum laughed with much enjoyment.

Nick smiled at this lovers' skirmish, but let no more time go to waste.

"I want to hear, right from your own lips, what you know about a man who was hit with a slung-shot near your house—"

"I didn't see him hit," reminded Peggy.

"But you heard it."

"I think I did."

"Go on!"

"Wal, it was like this: Pop Benner was anxious ter git me off ter bed, an' I had ter go whether I liked it or not. Yes, I did—as fur as the chamber. Did I get into bed? Wal, think not!"

"She fooled them!" quoth Plum, proudly.

"No, I didn't go ter bed, fer I thought somethin' was up, an' I wanted ter see it. So I played the spy on 'em, by jinks!"

"And then?"

"Walton an' my old gent hid in the alley, an' pretty soon a man come along. He seemed ter go inter, or near, the alley, an' then I lost sight o' him, but right after came a sound I've heard before."

"Sound of a slung-shot!" added Plum.

"Yes, I heard that, an' then all was still. Whoever got hit hadn't no time ter say he didn't like et, I reckon, fer I didn't hear of it ef he did, and I listened sharp."

"Then they carried him out on the pier—"

"Plum Gilder, be you tellin' this story, or be I?"

"My darlin', forget my short-comin's, fer I didn't mean et."

"Then keep mum!" tersely advised Miss Benner.

Plum looked at Nick and shook his head mournfully, as if to intimate that it was a very sorrowful thing that his lady-love had such a temper, and from that point he let Peggy tell her own story.

"Then," added Peggy, "they carried somethin' down on this very pier. I won't say et was a man, but anybody would be a fool ter think otherwise."

"Did you ever mention it to your father?" Nick asked.

"Not I."

"Did he mention it?"

"No."

"Ever hear him mention Epsom Griggs?"

"No."

"Is there absolutely nothing which you can tell to give me clew to the identity of the man thus summarily used?"

"Don't know the least thing. I would tell ef I could, but ye see et ain't possible. Dick Benner don't tell his secrets to me, nor in my hearin', so I git nothin' only what drops by the way."

"Peggy, I will give you fifty dollars to learn who it was they dumped into the dock."

"Fifty—*cher!*—dollars?"

"So I said."

"Why, you must be richer than Pop Mul-len, the shoemaker. Fifty—Say, I'm goin' fer that bribe!"

"Do so, and you shall have it. The fact that somebody was thus put out of the way is of much interest to me, and I want to know all about it."

"I'll earn that fifty, mister."

"When ye get it, divvy with me an'—"

Thus far Plum spoke, but he was interrupted.

"Not much I won't!" declared Peggy. "You kin hev a treat of ice cream out of it, an' that's all."

"But I was goin' ter say we could git married on that much."

"No, sir, Plum Gilder. When I scoop that hoodle I'm goin' ter blow it in," asserted Peggy. "But," she added, relenting, "of course I'll take you along, Plum. Why, we'll go ter Coney Island twice a week all summer."

While the young people were thus counting their unhatched chickens the sport was doing some thinking. He had hoped that a personal interview with Peggy would result in his getting more light on the tragedy of the pier, but this did not seem likely.

As it continued mysterious it grew more

fascinating, and he felt determined to investigate this confederation of knaves.

For some time he questioned Peggy, but nothing came of it, and she finally announced that she must go to the house. She went, while Nick and Plum lingered on the pier, so as not to advertise her by being seen in her company.

The man from Rusty Gulch looked down into the water.

"What a tale this dock could tell if it had lips to speak," he murmured.

"Et would be a corker," Plum agreed.

"That black water is just the thing to hold the secret of crime."

"Bet yer socks!"

"Dark and somber such a bed would be."

"And mighty wet and nasty."

"Yet, one might sleep well there, wrapped in death's funeral garments, methinks."

"Darn et all, mister, wot's got inter ye? You talk like a school-girl, by mighty, 'methinks!' As fer sleepin' well there, I should have a rip-roarin' nightmare every blessed night."

Nerve Nickol laughed.

"That is as one looks at it."

This talk, which seemed trivial to both of them, was really nothing of the sort. While they stood in inactivity, somebody else was active, and, unknown to them, danger was on the way.

They did not hear footsteps which sounded on the pier; they did not see dark forms which glided along the way, drawing nearer to them all the while; they did not dream that they were in bodily danger while they looked on the water and each indulged in talk illustrative of his nature.

"Anyhow," declared Plum, "I had rather be me than the feller they dumped over there."

"Right! We live, and we may make ourselves heard from yet. If I could get at the secret, I would yet learn who they sent to death so summarily, down here."

"How much would you give to know?"

A rough voice asked the question, and Nick and Plum turned quickly. They were not alone on the pier. Three men had advanced close to them, and now stood in what seemed a threatening attitude.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE SPORT FIGHTS FOR LIFE.

NERVE NICKOL was accustomed to sizing men up quickly, but it did not need much skill in this case. The dullest of mortals, hearing the voice in which the question was put, and seeing the half-threatening attitude of the new-comers, would have leaped to the conclusion that the unknown three meant mischief.

"How much would you give to know?"

Nick had not been quick to answer the interrogatory at first, and he who had spoken now repeated it.

"Did you speak to me, sir?" asked the sport.

"I did."

"I don't know you."

"That does not matter. You said you would give much for certain information—"

"To know who was murdered and thrown over here," bluntly explained Nick.

"Just so."

"Can you answer the question?"

"First, why do you ask it?"

"I am here to get information, not to give it."

"We will try to give you all you want."

"Then you know who was killed?"

"I did not say so, but I have a suggestion which, perhaps, will enable you to solve the inquiry which is burning holes in your brain."

There was a menace in all this person said, and Nerve Nickol was sure it would not end with empty words. There was the spirit of war back of it all, unless he was very much in error.

"I will hear your suggestion, sir," he answered.

"It is that if you want to know anything about the man you say is down there in the water you go down and look for him."

"Your suggestion lacks originality, sir. When a man starts out as an adviser, and especially when he gives advice unsolicited, he should be able to say something more brilliant than that."

"Lacks originality, eh?"

"It does."

"Perhaps we can improve on it."

The speaker suddenly raised his hand and made a motion, and then he and his two companions moved at the same moment. Like human hurricanes they rushed at Nerve Nickol.

The sport had expected it. Not only had he seen enough to show him that the man who was doing the talking was Walton, but Plum had softly whispered that another of the trio was Dick Benner, so the whole matter was clear, and Nick expected to fight for his life.

Headlong was the rush of the foe, and it looked as if Nick would be dashed into the water, but he had no intention of ending his career thus tragically.

Quietly waiting until they were almost beside him he then stepped to one side so nimbly that he not only avoided the rush but made it impossible for them to turn and touch him, while, at the same time, he sent out his fist so accurately that Dick was felled like a log.

"First knock-down!" cried Plum, gleefully. "Go in, old man; go in, an' I'll hold yer medals while ye churn 'em up!"

Walton and his second helper had almost run into the dock from the impetus of their unavailing rush, but they now recovered their balance and made another try.

"Dog, we will have ybu!" Walton hissed madly.

To the attack they leaped, but the unknown man came to grief at once. Plum Gilder knew he was no match in strength for these burly men, but he knew something about trickery. Slyly he introduced his foot in front of the unknown, and the latter tripped and fell with a resounding thump to the planks of the pier.

Walton was more fortunate. He succeeded in getting his hands on the sport, from Rusty Gulch.

"I have you!" he cried.

"So you have?"

Nick spoke cheerfully, and then he gave an exhibition of his power. Walton was whirled about in a most astonishing fashion, causing Plum to cry gleefully:

"Say, is this a school fer gymnasts?"

It was a school for more than that, for Dick and the unknown man were up, and their evil nature showed to the full. The trio had come there with a definite object, and they were not disposed to neglect any chance.

"Look out!" suddenly added Plum, "they've got knives!"

The purpose of the assailants was clear, and their weapons were ready for use. Plum got excited and rushed in, himself, but he had to do the liveliest kind of dodging to avoid a sweeping blow from one of the blades.

"Let me take care of them!" called out Nick, cheerfully. "This is the tallest kind of fun!"

Few persons would have found what he asserted, but he really seemed to believe it all. He swung Walton around so that the other men missed the purpose of their rush, and then laughed lightly.

"Call again!" he requested. "The latch-string is always out. Come and see me!"

Walton had been doing his best to get away, or to do damage to his opponent, but all in vain.

"Devil!" he panted, "are you made of iron?"

"Old man, you have guessed it. Don't you like this waltz? Then let us part company!"

Tightening his grip on the crook he suddenly flung him bodily at the again-advancing allies, and he struck Dick so forcibly that both went down in a pile.

Then the sport's manner changed.

"Enough of this!" he cried, keenly. "If you come again I shall receive you in Rusty Gulch style. Come if you will, but it will be to your death!"

Out came the speaker's revolver, and the trio saw it bearing on them as the fallen couple rose.

"Look out for the gun!" warned the unknown.

"To the fiends with it; I will not yield!"

Madly Walton rushed in again, and he

would have been the easiest kind of a target if Nick had used the revolver, but Plum had become worried. He exclaimed to Nick:

"Say, if ye do that, the perleece will be on top o' us in a jiffy!"

Nerve Nickol did not know any good reason why he should fear the police when he was fighting for his life, but the caution recalled the fact to his mind that such notoriety would bring him more into public view than was desirable. New York was not Rusty Gulch, and he must proceed on a different plan.

"I've had enough of this!" he cried.

Dropping the revolver into his pocket he leaped at Walton like a tiger and knocked him down. Another moment and he was upon Dick and the third assassin, and a few blows delivered there with the same terrific power of hitting he had before shown was all that was needed.

Plum Gilder, too, rushed in and did what he could, but after a little while he looked in vain for a foe.

Every one of the enemy was in rapid retreat down the street.

"Thunder!" quoth Plum.

"Have you a match, pard?" asked Nick.

"A match?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I wish to smoke!"

The surprising man from Rusty Gulch had brought out a cigar and was carefully biting off the tip.

"Wal, b'jinks! you're a corker!" declared Plum.

Young Mr. Gilder was himself about as cool as anybody could be, but this devotion to the pleasures of smoking, right after so fierce a battle, amazed even him.

Nick, himself, managed to find a match and secured his light.

"Say," suddenly spoke Plum, "I believe I kin make a strike here. Them fellers will hev a confab, an' I may be able ter hear et. Wait fer me two blocks away an' I'll soon be back!"

Plum did not wait for a reply, but hastened away, and his lithe form soon disappeared in the darkness.

Nick carelessly strolled to the place of meeting and waited as directed. It was half an hour later that Plum put in an appearance again.

"What luck?" the sport asked.

"I seen them an' played spy on 'em."

"Well?"

"Mister, be you a detective?"

"Am I a—what?" asked Nick, in surprise.

"Detective."

"I certainly am not. Why do you inquire?"

"Eg Walton thinks you be, b'jinks!"

"Then he is 'way off. No, I am not a detective, nor am I connected with any such person. Explain all this."

"Wal, I sneaked up nigh Eg an' the rest ez they stood on a pier further down, an' I heerd a good deal that was o' interest, though not so much ez I wish I had. Old man, et was their scheme, ter-night, to do ye up permanent."

"No doubt o' that."

"They are scared out o' their shoes by all this biz about Terrill an' Epsom Griggs, whatever it is, an' they are menaced by some detective. Who he is they don't know; he is a sort o' invisible chap, and they can't grasp his identity. They have had a letter from him which threatens them, an' it scares them prodigious, but that is all they do know. With State Prison yawnin' fer them they want ter know who the feller is, so they kin strike back, but know they don't. The invisible detective is hauntin' both their bodies an' their minds, ez I may say."

"The wages of crime!" murmured Nick.

Not bein' able ter see anybody else in the game, they think the detective must be you. The talk run about like this:

"Who can et be but Nickol?" says Walton.

"Et is him," says Dick Benner.

"So I believe. He has come into our affairs, an' I confess I'm afraid o' him. We hev had a sample o' his style, ter-night, which is jest appallin'. Now, we must stop him."

"We tried et ter-night," says Dick.

"We will try again. There ain't room

enough on the earth fer us an' him, too. He must get off. Men, let us summon all our force an' see that this long-haired scoundrel dies!"

"Walton said that, did he?"

"Yes."

"He planned well," replied Nick, "but he will not execute. I am not afraid of him or all his gang."

"There are five or six o' them."

"All the better; it will enliven things. I did not come to New York to fight, but if—"

"Mister, tell me straight, be you a detective?"

"Upon my word of honor, I am not!"

CHAPTER XIV.

CONCERNING CASH.

NERVE NICKOL and Plum took their way home without further adventures. Each experience they had together served to knit them more firmly together as "pards," as Nick expressed it, and they resolved to continue the association. The sport said plainly that he wanted to know more of Walton and his party, and as Plum had real skill in such lines, he was given liberty to use his wits to the utmost.

"I will give you a hundred dollars to solve this mystery," added Nick. "Money is no object to me in the case. Yes, I will make it five hundred, by Jove!"

At that moment the sport's visible funds were reduced to ten dollars, and he could as well promise the one sum as the other.

Despite this plan of action the next three days brought no striking discoveries, and the man from Rusty Gulch spent his time in a way rather frivolous for one with a fixed purpose in view.

Every day he called at the Hamilton house. Ostensibly, this was to see old Abram, but Nick seemed to have a very poor memory as to the hours when the money-lender was likely to be at home, and as a result he more often found him out than in.

When he was in, Nick talked entertainingly about the financial ventures he was going to make, but he never produced the means of making them. He accounted for this by saying he had not looked around as much as he wished, and Hamilton kept as patient as possible.

When the master of the house was not in Nick talked with Amy, but not on money affairs. The boldness of the sport at the first interview had not ruined his chances with the money-lender's daughter, and she no longer needed her father's advice to treat Nick with consideration. Plainly, Nick had won his way to her regard. He could talk very entertainingly, but she had often thought that if he could cut his handsome hair down to the point required by the rules of civilization he would be the superior of her city friends.

And Nick?

He sat in his private room with his head resting on his hands when his valet came to him.

Steadily English Joseph Jones had won his way with his employer. The sport found him a very superior person, not only as a valet, but as a man, and Nick admired him greatly. Now, Joseph had something to say.

"Mr. Nickol, the bill for the dinner you gave to the three Western statesmen has come in."

"Pay it, Joseph," gently replied Nick.

"I—excuse me, sir, but I have none of your money, now."

"I will draw a check."

"Yes, sir."

Joseph took it as a matter of course, but, though his employer was always talking of drawing a check, the valet had never seen one. He would have been dull if he had not understood where the money came from when it did come, but he was always the same polite and deferential Joseph.

"I will attend to this soon."

"Yes, sir."

Joseph was too well trained not to know when to leave, and he left now. When the door closed behind him Nick sprang to his feet suddenly.

"Money, more money! It is always the cry, and I am getting tired of it. Money! It is the god of New York! I would not

mind this, but how the dickens am I to pay when I have no money?"

He took a nervous turn about the room.

"Out in Rusty Gulch," he added, "men live with their revolvers at half-cock and ready to defend their lives at a moment's notice. I was always with the boys in those days, but I drew the fine at one thing. Although I had a wonderful faculty with the cards, I refused at all times to play for money. Realizing that gambling was one of the worst, and the most unmanly, of the vices which beset man, I would have no part of it. What is my condition now?"

Back and forth he went through the room.

"I hate myself!" he declared, abruptly.

Another turn across the floor.

"If I had found Epsom Griggs here this would not have been," he muttered, "but Epsom was not to be found, and what was I to do? I ought to have gone out and worked as a street laborer, or something of the sort, like an honest man. Instead of that I have— Confound it! I have turned knave. Gambler! Well, well, what shall I do next, and what—would—she—think?"

A long walk across the room, and then he suddenly decided:

"I will go to see her. I can't confess my knavery, but her presence will cheer me up."

It was soon clear who "she" was, for he went straight to Abram Hamilton's house, where he was received by Amy.

Her manner was gracious. His—well, he tried to make it matter of fact, but the fact was he was dead in love with Amy, and it was not easy to hide the infatuation.

Now, as usual when with her, he alternated between love for her and despair at his own unworthiness. He despised himself for the life he was leading, and often had hard work to keep from drifting into deepest gloom.

"Have I missed Mr. Hamilton?" he asked.

Amy smiled. Nick was not lacking in common sense, and she knew very well that he must by this time know as much about Hamilton's hours as the money-lender himself did.

"Father has not yet returned."

"I wanted to ask him about a venture where a good deal of cash can be made if it be successful."

"You seem devoted to business, Mr. Nickol."

Guilty Nick could not help flushing slightly.

"Men have to be."

"Do you own much real estate in Rusty Gulch?"

"Enough to bury all New York in."

"I do not think they are in haste to be buried."

"They could not find a fairer place than Rusty Gulch!" declared the sport, with enthusiasm.

"It is in the mountains, is it not?"

"Yes, but *such* mountains!"

"The scenery is fine, I infer."

"Grand! Simply grand!"

"I have never been in the West, and my ideas of how those mountain lands look is very vague. I have heard that some places have no vegetation, while others have such things in abundance. How does Rusty Gulch look?"

A shade went over Nick's face. One would have said it was not a subject upon which he liked to talk, but the question had come from a source where he could not say a word of lightness.

He rallied nobly.

"Well, the place is a bit out of the world, now, as we have not yet secured railroad facilities, but the road is on the way. Just now we have to rely on the stage, and I can assure you that when one passes through Hercules Pass and gets the first view of the town, it is bewildering."

"Tell me all about it!"

Nick had thrown a good deal of enthusiasm into his voice, and Amy grew interested to such an extent that he could not lessen his zeal.

"Well, from that point one sees Eden Valley, a vale of some hundred acres, and a perfect garden. Nowhere else is the grass so green as there; it is one vast carpet of Nature; and through it winds the silver streams—Paradise Run, Elysian Brook, Nectar Creek, Thunder River and others."

"How delightfully named!"

"I selected all the names."

"You have the soul of a poet. Go on, go on!"

Eager was the air of the girl, and Nick did not falter.

"Above the town are the mountains, the guardians of the valley, rearing their heads aloft until their tops seem to kiss the lips of the clouds. The tongue falters in the effort to give these mountains their meed of praise. There is Mount Babel, Mammoth Mount, Mount Terrible, King Peak, and many others."

"How grand!"

"Down on the plain," pursued Nick, with zeal, "lies the liveliest town in the world. Patterned after the world-famed villages of New England, there is no fairer spot the eye can rest upon. Neat little houses, and magnificent mansions, and unique villas—according to the means and taste of the owners—dot the landscape and make it a scene fit for the brush of an Angelo or a Rubens."

"I can almost see it, so vivid is your description."

"Then over all are the flowers. We may boast of the cultivated flowers over which there is so much talk, but what are they in comparison with Nature? Valley and mountain have alike these flowers, and it is one wilderness of beauty."

"Mr. Nickol, I am more than half in love with the place."

"What would your feelings be if you could see it?"

"Delightful, I am sure."

"I can see your face as it would look if you could gaze on Rusty Gulch."

"And your own home?"

"A villa, pure and simple; a residence of many curves and angles, with no lofty walls to frown on the sensitive mind, but with dwellings so neatly connected that you would admire the skill of the designer. It pleases me, for it is home—a home of flowers, sunshine, simplicity, and many rods of winding walks."

"And here we are cooped up in this dull old city!" sighed Amy. "I think, Mr. Nickol, you told me you were owner in several mines?"

"Only three," modestly answered Nick. "These are the Golden Gleam, the Nonpareil and the Mountain Heart mines."

"What romantic names for all things there. Did you select them?"

"Some of them," admitted Nick.

"Being a mine-owner, you are lucky in also being owner of the First Security Bank of Rusty Gulch, as you can do your own business."

"Did I—a—mention the bank?"

"Yes, when you were here once before."

"Oh! yes."

"You also mentioned the noble enterprise you and Colonel Higgins were interested in."

"That was—that was—"

"Don't you recall it?"

"Well, you see the colonel and I—"

"Have done many things of the kind. I understand. But I refer to the church you put up for the Gulch."

"Oh! yes, to be sure; the church. We thought it might do some good, you see."

"A noble thing, truly. All these things must have cost you a good deal of money."

"Naturally, it took some, but what is mere cash? Money, money! What does it amount to, save to do good to the poor and needy? Miss Hamilton, I feel concerned for the poor in this world's goods. Yes, I feel deeply for those who have no money!"

Mr. Nickol's hand strayed to his pocket. Almost empty it was, and if he had dwelt on the subject of poverty he might possibly have told Amy of its woes with more realism than he had spoken of the glories of Rusty Gulch.

Somehow, the turn of conversation made him feel gloomy, and he changed the subject as soon as possible. Half an hour longer he lingered in this delightful company, and then he left the house.

He had been happy with Amy, but now he relapsed wholly into gloom.

"I am the biggest scoundrel alive!" he declared, fiercely. "Why do I lie to this girl, when I love her so, and want her good opinion? Yet, why not? The crash is bound to come, and she will despise me, so why not let it be so complete, when it does occur, that she will not have one pleasant memory of me?"

"I told her one true thing to-day—I can, indeed, imagine how her face would look if she could see Rusty Gulch—see it with its bleak mountains, sandy valley and poverty-stricken people. The bank, the church, the flowers and the villa would not be there, but the sand and the grassless hills are."

"One lonely goat would starve in Rusty Gulch, if obliged to rely on his own resources, but its atmosphere is conducive to liars, and to long life if the Vigilantes do not catch a man before his time comes."

He sighed and walked on with his face always serious and set. At last he muttered in a hopeless way:

"If I were to return to Rusty Gulch now, and become known as I am, the Vigilantes would see me outside the town!"

CHAPTER XV.

SOMEBODY GETS DROPPED ON.

It was evening when Egbert Walton knocked at the door of Dick Benner's house and was admitted by Dick, himself.

"You are the last," remarked the host.

"So the rest have arrived?"

"All in, now. Come with me and we will get down ter biz."

"Where is Peggy?" asked Walton.

"I sent her to stay with a family ter-night, so she is wal out o' the way."

"I don't have much faith in the fidelity of that girl, Dick."

"Nor I, but we need not worry about her now."

Benner led the way to a room on the second floor where Tony Pierson, Clarence Allyne and Josh Martin were already seated.

"The Fancy Five are now all in," observed Clarence. "Demme! we will settle this, to-night."

"It will remain to settle Nerve Nickol," reminded Walton.

"Gad! but wouldn't I like a hack at that fellow!"

"Go ahead, if you want it. I'll give you a hundred dollars to whip him, and double that to kill the meddling fool."

"Clarence is just the man for the job!" sneered Josh. "With his muscle he would soon eat Nickol up."

"Demme! you needn't poke fun at me, sir!" cried the weak little nonentity of the Fancy Five.

"Drop personalities," advised Walton, "and let us come to business. The question is how do we stand?"

"Give us your own report, first, Eg," suggested Tony.

"It is simple. I have seen to the cabman who brought us the note signed 'Charon,' and I find him just what he claimed to be, a simple cabman. He surely is no more, and I am convinced that he was hired to bring that letter exactly as he claimed."

"But you don't know who hired him?"

"No."

"Well, about the spiritualist?"

"Another real thing. However much sensible minds may rebel against the idea of spirits dancing attendance on man, and coming around to call on him, we must decide that the spiritualist in this case is a genuine member of the fraternity, and he declares he did not loan himself to any one to alarm us."

"Then we did see Terrill's ghost," added Tony.

"Rubbish! I want nobody in association with me who believes in such nonsense as ghosts. Even if the master of ceremonies was not in the plot there was, of course, some underhand work done at the entertainment."

"Then you think there is a detective on our track?"

"Yes."

"One who knows we did Terrill up?"

"Yes."

"And we all think it is this supposed Western fellow who calls himself Norman Nickol."

"Yes, again."

"Before we go further, let us hear from Clarence Allyne. Clarry, have you any pointers on Epsom Griggs?"

"Demme, no! I saw the servant and gave a bribe, but that's all the good it did. The servant says Epsom was admitted, but was not seen to go out by my informant. Old

Hamilton saw Epsom in the parlor, and they were together a good while. After that, there is no trace of Epsom at all."

"And this is your whole report?"

"Yes."

"Hamilton has killed Epsom!" declared Walton.

"Have you proof to that effect?"

"No, but the evidence points to that conclusion with unerring accuracy. Now, we sent Griggs there to get money out of Hamilton, with the agreement we were to have a share. Hamilton would not know we were in the plot, and would think he could rid himself of the whole danger by murdering Griggs."

"Looks that way."

"Depend upon it, Hamilton has killed him."

"I suggest that we go an' accuse the old man, an' demand cash fer our silence," cried Dick Benner.

"Slowly! The first thing we must do is to get Nerve Nickol out of the way. I am sure he is a detective, and if he is not he is just as dangerous. He is a tough man to deal with, and the sooner we drop him out of the world, the better."

"Your plan is—"

"That we draw lots to see who will walk right up to him and shoot the fellow."

"Ef thar is any competition fer the honor I will drop out o' the list o' claimants," remarked Josh, whereupon there was a laugh.

"The only fair way is the lot system," persisted Walton.

"That is correct. Dick, what can you do for us?"

"There is some beans in the next room, an' I'll git four white ones an' one black, an' the black shall be the killer."

"A good plan. Go ahead."

Dick rose and opened the door of the other room. It was unlighted but he knew where to look, and he did not take the trouble to get another lamp. He went ahead, keeping his hands stretched out to avoid obstacles.

He had gone half way when he heard a sound just ahead of him.

"Confound that cat!" he muttered.

He gave a kick at the supposed cat, but did not connect with anything tangible. His efforts, however, nearly upset him and he lurched forward and collided with a chair. This completed his misfortunes and he stumbled and fell.

Very much to his surprise he did not go down to the floor, and when he had gone as far as he could he felt the thing which was under him heave and squirm in a surprising way.

He grew scared.

"What the dickens— Here, help!"

"Hallo, Dick!"

"This way, quick! I've got—"

Dick did not finish the sentence. Whatever he had was squirming worse than ever, and Dick roared with pain as he got a stinging blow in the nose. He had closed his fingers upon the singular something, but he let go when he received that blow.

Walton was hurrying in with the lamp, but at the door he met some one he was not looking for. He saw a slight, boyish figure, and then that figure ran into him with force which knocked the lamp out of his hand and sent him reeling to the floor.

There was an intruder there, and he would have made good his escape had it not been that Tony had followed so close after Walton. As it was the intruder ran plump into Tony's arms, and was seized and held fast after an exciting struggle.

"Murder!" cried Dick, "I have got my death wound."

"Get a light!" ordered Walton, caressing his stomach, as that part of his anatomy had received a severe shock. "Thunderation! will you be quick about it?"

Clarence hustled around and finally succeeded in obeying the command, and then the members of the Fancy Five, damaged and undamaged, looked to see what they had run up against. They saw only a slight figure in Tony's grasp, but it was enough to bring light to Walton's mind.

"Perdition!" he snapped.

"The boy was spying on us."

"Do you know him?" Walton demanded.

"No."

"It is the young whelp who trains with Nerve Nickol."

"The dickens it is!"

All gazed in dismay at the prisoner, but he was taking it very coolly. Well aware that he was in for a bad fix, he had courage enough to make the most of the situation and not weaken when weakening would do no good. Besides this, having seen that he could not escape from Tony's grasp, he was already planning another way of getting out of his difficulty, and aiming to put them off their guard.

"What is he doing here?" wondered Tony.

"There can be but one explanation, and that is that he is a spy," replied Walton, hotly. "Boys, we want to make an example of this fellow."

"First of all, I want to know how he got inter my house!" declared Dick Benner. "The front door is never kept unlocked, an' mebbe you kin see how he got in. I can't."

"Where is that hopeful girl of yours?"

"I told you she had gone ter a neighbor's."

"Did you see her go?"

"Is there any proof that she did not return?"

"Wal, no."

"Search the house and you will find her. The girl has sold you out; that's the explanation of it all."

Plum Gilder looked worried when Dick started out on the search, but when, a few minutes later, he returned with the announcement that Peggy was not visible on the premises, a faint gleam of relief was to be seen in Plum's eyes.

"I don't relieve her of blame," asserted Walton, stubbornly, "but we will let it rest for now. What we want to do first of all," he added, in a hard voice, "is to settle the case of this young whelp who has played the spy on us. It'll be his last work of the kind, by Jove!"

CHAPTER XVI.

UNEXPECTED EVENTS.

PLUM GILDER listened to all that was said and gave no sign of emotion. This did not indicate that he was indifferent to the situation, for he was well aware that he was in a place where almost anything was to be expected. These men were desperate men, and as he had learned their secrets so far there was no knowing what they would do to protect themselves.

Walton turned upon him and glared for some time in silence.

"You young scoundrel!" he finally exclaimed, "you see what your meddlesome proclivities have brought you to."

"Dunno anything about proclivities," replied Plum, easily. "Ain't got any with me ter-day."

"The door was open an' I was sleepy, so I jest walked in ter get a place ter sleep."

"You lie!"

"Oh! do I?"

"Yes."

"Mebbe you kin tell this story better than I kin."

"Peggy Benner let you in."

"Nary, mister."

"And you came to act the spy. You need not deny anything, for it will be a waste of breath."

"All right, old hoss; ef you've got this fixed I won't trouble you with my views on the subjick."

"A confession on the subject will do you much good. We know you were here as a spy, but if you explain all about it you will take away some of the severe consequences of your act. Unless you do this we shall, of course, turn you over to the police."

"Do so, mister. Le's waltz around there immediate, an' then we will see ef it's sech a hijjus thing fer a poor orfin boy ter take a nap when he's sleepy."

Plum knew very well that he would not be taken to the police, for that was a department of the city which his foes had the most urgent reasons for avoiding. He wished it might be so, for, in spite of his cool manner, he was rather worried by his captivity.

Walton might see fit to use him as Terrill had been used.

"Where is Nerve Nickol?" demanded Walton, suddenly.

"Dunno."

"He sent you here."

"Did he? Queer I didn't know et afore you spoke."

"Do you deny it?"

"Sure!"

"Come, boy, don't be a fool. You can save yourself in this case by making a full, frank statement of your situation. Don't be a fool and tempt our wrath. Will you confess?"

"Mister, I would ef I had anything ter confess."

"Fool!"

"Say, you hurt my feelin's when you speak so harsh, b'jinks!" declared Plum, with an aggrieved air, but without the sincerity which goes to mark the truly sorrowful person.

Walton was shrewd enough to suspect that he would not be able to make much out of a street boy who was taking the matter so coolly, but he did not give up easily. For a long while he persevered in trying to get the desired confession and explanation, but he did not succeed as he hoped.

Plum denied everything, and no advance was made.

The crook gave it up, at last, his face flushing with anger.

"If you want to act the stubborn fool, do so!" he exclaimed, "but I assure you that you will gain nothing by it. Dick, I think you can find a place to put this kid?"

"I can that."

"Then he stays here as a prisoner."

"Say, I object!" declared Plum, sturdily.

"Will you confess?"

"General, ef I had a thing ter confess I would take solid pleasure in singin' my ditty in yer ears."

"I will fool with you no more. Away with him, Dick, and we will starve the hound into submission."

Plum protested further, but in vain, and he was conducted to the cellar of the house and stowed away there, his hands being secured with cords. Then his foes left him.

"Melancholy sittivation!" he muttered, his spirits in no way dampened by the calamity. "I am shut up in the dark, an' can't see ter fix my bangs ner clean out my finger-nails. This is w'ot I call mighty tough, but I s'pose et's the fortune o' war. Plum, old chap, you are out o' the race. You will be cat up an' killed fer sure!"

There was humor in all he said, but this did not indicate that he was oblivious to the dangers of his position. Well did he know he was in the power of foes who would show no mercy.

He tried his bonds thoroughly, but found them too strong to be broken by any effort he could make.

"I am in for et unless Peggy comes to my aid," he soliloquized. "That uncommon smart gal managed ter dodge 'em somehow an' escape while they was settin' onter me in ther dark, an' she may be heard from later on. Ef she ain't, I seem ter be a gone coon, fer who else knows where I be? Sad outlook, b'jinks! but Plum Gilder don't cave fer a cent. Say, I wonder ef them skunks has got the lot drawed yet, ter see who'll kill Nick? Oh! won't the feller who draws the lot have a pile o' fun with N. Nickol, Esquire! Ha! ha!"

Nothing could put Plum down, but as the hours rolled away it grew lonesome in the dark cellar. His bonds gave him pain, and he wished himself well out of it, but Peggy did not come, and he could do no more than to wait.

Finally he fell asleep.

When he awoke some one was shaking him. He became clear-headed in a moment.

"All right," he said, briskly. "I s'pose you're goin' ter kill me now, so we needn't delay the percession—"

"Hush!"

"What's that?"

"I am a friend, come to release you."

"The dickens you be!"

"Be very quiet and make no noise that may attract attention. Let me get at your hands and I will release you."

"Say, who be you, anyhow?"

"A friend."

With this non-committal reply the unknown fumbled at the prisoner's bonds and soon cast them off.

"You are free," he remarked, quietly.

"But we are still in the lair o' the lion, b'jinks!"

"They sleep at this hour, and we need not mind them. Of course our only way out is by the stairs. We must go to their part of the house, but I do not imagine there will be any trouble. Dick Benner and Josh Martin are the only men here, and they sleep in stupid faith in the bonds they have put upon you."

"Mister, I don't know you from Adam's off-ox, but you are a trump from 'way-back. Lead on, an' I'll foller."

The rescuer again impressed the need of caution upon Plum, and then they went up the stairs. All was darkness, but the leader seemed to find his way without trouble, and Plum kept close to his heels.

The kitchen was reached and they were turning toward the outer door when a light suddenly shone upon the scene and Plum prepared for a fight. But there was no need of such a thing, for the person with whom they stood face to face was none other than Peggy.

She stopped short in surprise equal to their own, but the guide sprung forward and seized her in a firm grasp.

"Not a word!" he commanded.

"Hold on!" cried Plum.

"What is it?"

"Don't be scared o' that gal; she's my right bower."

The unknown slightly released his hold.

"Is this Benner's girl?"

"No, et's *my* girl," explicitly explained Plum, "but et's Benner's daughter, jest the same."

"Then it is all right."

The rescuer released his hold fully, while Plum seized the hand of his *inamorata*.

"Peggy, you're a brick, b'jinks! I know you was on yer way ter git me out o' hock, but you was one lap too late. I am all hunk, ye see, an' you needn't cry yer pretty eyes out."

The situation was too serious for Peggy to retort as she sometimes did, and she gasped:

"Oh! Plum, I thought you was gone up!"

"I was gone *down*, but I've jest come up, now. Say, them chaps thought they had a dead graft on me, but they didn't hev, by gum!"

"You can go away now?"

"Sure!"

"Then lose no time. I am dreadfully afraid o' them fer your sake, an' you want ter look out."

"Now, don't be scared, my angel. The ruction is all over, an' all I have ter do is to amble out. But, Peggy, et'll never do fer you ter stay. They suspect you, an'—"

"Say, do ye s'pose I'm afraid o' that gang?" demanded Peggy, with scorn. "Why, I wouldn't wipe my shoes on the whole lot, an' they can't scare me fer a cent, I say. Get out o' here, Plum, an' then it'll be all right."

She began to push Plum toward the door, and though he persisted in asserting that she ought to go, too, to avoid danger to herself, she would not listen to it.

"I ain't afraid o' the whole caboodle, an' I'd like ter see them bluff me. No, I won't go away, an' you can't make me."

She was fixed in her resolution, and Plum had to give it up. Really, he did not think they would do her serious harm, and her courage finally led him to agree to her plan. He was in an exultant mood over his escape, and he stole a kiss from Peggy and then followed the rescuer out of the house.

The latter had said nothing during the last part of the conversation, but Plum now tackled him.

"General, you are a baked brick!" he declared. "I am everlastin'ly obliged ter you, an'—"

"Don't mention it. You are now free, and I will leave you—"

"Hold on! Who be you, anyhow?"

"My name is Griffin."

"How did you happen ter rescue me—"

"I thought you would not like it down there in the cellar."

"You figgered to a fine p'int, b'jinks! but

that don't explain. You say your name is Griffin, but I don't know ye any the better fer that. Who is Griffin? What is his line o' biz? How did he happen ter come to my help? What have you ter say fer yourself?"

"Nothing!" and the stranger turned away.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PERPLEXING MYSTERY.

"HOLD on, mister; hold on!"

Plum Gilder was not disposed to see the interview end so unsatisfactorily, and he caught his rescuer by the arm.

"I want ter know more o' you," he asserted.

"What more is there to be known?" the rescuer asked, calmly.

"When shall I see you again?"

"I don't know."

"Where can I see ye?"

"I will drop around."

"That don't answer me. You hev saved my life in a right smart way, an' you an' me ought to be chums from this out. I want ter git acquainted with ye, an' then you can call around an' see me an' Peggy when we git spliced up."

"I will surely do that, but you must excuse me now. I have no more to say. Good-night, my friend!"

Again the stranger started off. Plum called to him, but he did not heed the call. Instead, he made haste to get away.

"That's cool!" quoth Plum. "I don't want ter be over inquisitive, but et strikes me this feller is too good a friend ter lose easy, an' too confounded mysterious ter be let go so. I'll foller him."

He did so.

Plum Gilder was a shrewd young man, but he was not equal to the task he had set for himself on this occasion. He kept on the unknown's track for awhile all right, but was finally thrown off by a cunning trick and left alone on the sidewalk.

"Beat out, b'jinks!" he commented, dismally. "Old man Gilder, you may be all right fer ordinary work, but et seems you ain't in it fer dealin' with sech fellers. He was bound ter throw me off the scent. Why was et? He rescued me ez pretty ez you please, and then shook me like I was poison. Say, that fellow is the most mysterious duck I ever did see in my life!"

Homeward the boy walked, and the more he thought on the subject the more puzzled he grew. He could not see daylight in the affair, but every moment increased the belief that "Griffin" was very much of the mysterious order.

"Dunno when I'll see him again, ef I ever do," he thought, "but I'll keep my olinkers open, an' I may yit score one on Grif. The whole thing is confounded funny!"

So thought the Fancy Five, the next day, when they found their young prisoner missing. They naturally suspected Peggy, but she denied all, and her statement was corroborated by the finding of the footsteps of a man imprinted on the cellar bottom.

This worried them, and their troubles were added to by the receipt of a letter by the morning mail. It was as follows:

"WALTON, AND OTHERS:—If you want to live your day out you will let my friends alone. Keep your hands from Plum Gilder, and mind your own business strictly or expect trouble. Rest if you can, and sleep if you are so rash, but forget not that you are always watched. Justice is on your track and I am hunting you to the death. Invisible though I am to you I never cease to have you under my eye, and you are struggling in vain when you seek to baffle me. No man can baffle me, for I am as sure as death, itself, and as invisible.

"CHARON, DETECTIVE."

Egbert Walton grew pale with anger.

"Men!" he cried, "this fiend who works in the dark, and threatens so glibly, shall not live to see his triumph come. He must die, and this is our duty. If we give him a chance he will destroy us. He must not have that chance—we will hunt him down!"

On this same day events of importance came to pass in the house of Abram Hamilton, money-lender. To Amy came Susan Duff, a servant who had long been in their service. She addressed her young mistress,

and the latter noticed that she was ill at ease and nervous.

"Miss Amy, I want to speak with you," she faltered.

"Certainly, Susan."

"I—I have come to give my notice."

"Your what?"

"I am going to leave!"

"You are? Why?"

"Well, Miss Amy, I think it best," and Susan looked down and moved uneasily.

"I am greatly surprised, for you have always given satisfaction, and I thought you seemed equally pleased with your service with us."

"Well, I can't help it."

"Susan, you act oddly. If I have done you any injustice I shall be glad to make amends—"

Susan burst into tears.

"Miss Amy, you have done nothing out of the way; you have always been very kind to me, and my heart is just broke to leave you."

"Then why do you leave?" inquired Amy, in surprise.

"I can't tell you, Miss Amy."

"Why not?"

"Don't ask me!"

Susan looked down and twisted her apron-strings nervously, and it was plain that her tears would keep on flowing if they were not checked by good judgment.

This was not easy to do. She had a reason but did not want to tell it, and for some time all the persuasion failed to make her talk. Finally she began to hesitate, and Amy saw she was approaching the explanation.

"Tell me your reason," she urged, "and perhaps what looks so dark to you may be simple to me. I may be able to satisfy you that there is no good cause for you to leave."

"If you only could, Miss Amy!" cried Susan.

"Well, let me see."

Encouraging was the invitation, but it was some time longer before she could be induced to talk. At last she yielded wholly.

"I will tell you all about it, though I had much rather and say nothing, but even if you never see me again I feel that I had better speak out. It is hard, though, and if I do wrong to any one I know you will not forgive me."

All this, taken with Susan's tears, sighs and mysterious manner, had made an impression on Amy, and she was not wholly free from nervousness, herself, when the girl began.

"It all goes back to one night when I let a stranger in at the door," began Susan. "I do not know whether you saw him at all or not, but I think you did not. He was an old man, and when he was in the parlor and had asked to see Mr. Hamilton, I inquired what name I was to take to the master."

"No name," says he, "but just say there is a gentleman to see Mr. Hamilton."

"With that I went along and gave the message, and I saw Mr. Hamilton go to the parlor. Two or three times after I passed the door and heard them talking, but I gave it never a thought."

"That evening I had to go out and see my sick cousin, and when I came back it was rather late. I went up-stairs on my way to my room, and when I got on the next floor I saw a light shining under the door."

"Now, I was in that room just before I went out, and had lighted the gas to do some work, and the idea came to me all of a sudden that I had by accident left the gas burning. I was a little bit flustered, and without waiting to think, I opened the door."

"What I saw was unexpected, and it gave me a shock."

"Not for a moment had I expected to find a guest there, or any sign of one, but the first thing I did see was the bed, all ruffled up as if some one had just got out of it, and on a chair was the clothes of a man, his trousers, coat and other things."

"Of course I realized that I had got into a room where a guest had been put, and it so rattled me that I just beat a quick retreat and went away."

"When I got up to my own room I was full on of wonder. I couldn't understand it at all. I had seen as I went by that the bath-

room door was open and the room empty, and I could not see where the strange man had gone and left all his clothes behind him.

"Of course this did not occupy my time long, an' I fell asleep and about forgot it. In the morning, though, I expected to see the stranger at the table, and I went in to wait on you with some embarrassment, because I had gone into the room the night before, but the unknown man was not there."

"Naturally, I supposed he had gone away early, and nothing was said about him by me or any one else. When I went to do the chamber work I went to the guest-chamber first of all."

"Entering, I had a new surprise—the bed was made up. I stood still, not knowing what to think of it, for nobody but me ever does such work, you know."

"Then I saw that the work was very poorly done, so I advanced to do it over. Miss Amy, no woman ever made that bed. It was a very poor job, indeed, and I set out to do it all over."

"I made a new discovery. Since I had last put the room to rights somebody had taken one of the pillow-cases away and put another in its place. Of those now on the pillows they were not mates, and you know how particular I am, according to your orders, about such things."

"One of the two was put on in a very slovenly way, and this was an old one which had been turned over some time before for use in the servants' quarters."

"Now, let me stop right here and ask who it was that had made up that bed. It's a big mystery."

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN OMINOUS CALLER.

AMY had listened attentively, and with some interest to the story told by the servant, though she had thus far failed to see any reason in it why Susan should give notice to leave. To the last question she replied:

"Singular as it seems, I should say the unknown guest of the night must have made his own bed before leaving in the morning."

"But do you know where the linen is kept?"

"Yes."

"How could any stranger have found it, and then put a fresh pillow-case on in the place of the missing one?"

"Really, that is mysterious. But have you never found the missing one?"

"Let me speak of that later."

Susan shivered as she spoke, and Amy grew more anxious. The girl was not imaginative, and had never been given to nervousness. Amy urged her to continue.

"The next is dreadful, Miss Amy. Of course I put the bed to rights, and I had just finished when I saw something on the wall—a bright red spot which looked very queer to me in that place. Miss Amy, it was blood!"

Susan stopped short, and her eyes expanded in a singular way—a look of terror came into her face.

"Blood!" echoed Amy.

"Yes."

"Are you sure of what you say?"

"I could not swear to it, but there was no doubt in my mind then, and things which have happened since show that I am right. Yes, it was blood, but it isn't there now. I cleaned it away, wondering how it could have got there."

"Do you know, now?"

"I do not, but there is one thing more to tell. Ever since then I have been puzzling over all this, and wondering if I should ever know about it, but a new discovery has been made me think I do not wish to know."

"What is it?"

"Yesterday I had occasion to go to the cellar, to search for things I had put there when the carpets were last cleaned. You said they had become worthless with age, and I put them there. So I went and, Miss Amy," added Susan, in an awe-struck whisper, "I found more than I had expected."

"What?"

"That pillow-case, just red with blood!"

The statement, and the manner in which it was made impressed Amy powerfully. The

color died out of her cheeks, and she looked as much frightened as Susan.

"Stained with blood!"

"Yes, Miss Amy."

"And in the cellar?"

"Yes."

"Who in the world could have put it there?"

"I don't know."

"Did it—did it seem to be open to view?"

"It was tucked away out of sight, and I should not have found it at all if I had not been making the search I have spoken of."

"Who should hide it?"

"Yes, and why?"

"Are you sure it was the same case you had missed?"

"I will swear to it, and you can see it yourself—"

"No, no; I do not wish to."

"Well, there the thing is, down there in the cellar, and it just gives me the chills to think of it. What became of the man who was in that room a part of the time that night? Why was the bed made up so carefully by somebody? How was all that blood shed?"

"Susan, do you know more than this?"

"Not a thing, but after knowing so much I can't rest here. There was something done that night which haunts the house, and I want no part of it. I must go!"

Amy sat in silence. She knew the servant too well to doubt her word for a moment, and she had to accept the whole mystery and only look for the explanation. The meaning she could not grasp, but a certain fact was forced upon her with telling force.

That night her father had had a caller; a guest had been put to bed unknown to any of the women of the house, and he had disappeared strangely and left strange signs behind him.

Somebody knew of him. Who? Who could it be but the man who had received him as a caller?

Amy would have been blind not to see to what the evidence pointed, and if Abram Hamilton would have coveted her good opinion at that moment, it was unlucky for him that he had deserved it so little in the past. Amy had known of his reputation for meanness, for duplicity in business and the will he possessed to grind a creditor to the wall; she had known that such unfortunates had been driven to dreadful deeds in their despair, and she had never seen Abram show one sign of pity or remorse.

Knowing all this, she did not now rush to his aid with excuses to herself as she would have done with a noble man.

"If she had been called upon to state what she really thought, at that moment, she could not have done it. Time was needed for her to think and arrange the evidence. She could not have said what she thought had happened that night—she dared not imagine, then, who had been at the bottom of the happenings.

One thing she did see clearly, and that was that she did not want Susan to leave the house.

She said so, and, though it was a long, hard undertaking, she did succeed in inducing the girl to withhold her notice to leave for the time. Then Susan went about her work, and Amy was alone to wrestle with the problem she had to encounter.

By a singular chance Abram Hamilton had a caller while the conversation was taking place between the two girls. He had been very careful whom he saw since a certain call had brought him so much trouble, but this man sent his name.

"Amos Gray."

So he read on the card.

"I will see him at once."

He went to the parlor and found a plain-looking man who was dressed in seedy garments, and who, Abram thought, resembled a money-seeker. Believing this, the old man received him cordially.

"I am Mr. Hamilton, sir," he explained.

"What can I do for you?"

"I have called for information, sir."

"Ah! about borrowing money, I dare say?"

"No, sir."

"No?"

Abram looked as if he had received a personal affront.

"That is not it. To come right to the point, can you tell me where Epsom Griggs now is?"

The caller had his eyes fixed upon Abram, and his regard was a close and keen one. There was enough to repay his watchful attention. The money-lender started abruptly, and his color faded away.

He sat looking at the speaker with a look of fright.

"Epsom Griggs is the name," added Amos Gray.

"I—I know no such man," faltered Hamilton.

"Why, he was one of your oldest acquaintances."

"No, sir, no!" declared Hamilton.

"You and he were feller clerks in the employ of Smith & Connor; then you were together in the First Security Bank; and then—"

"I don't know him!" asserted Abram, shrilly.

"You surely do."

"Possibly, long ago, but I have forgotten him if I did."

"But he called on you only a few weeks ago."

"He did not."

"Think again."

"I tell you I know nothing about him. What! don't I know? Sir, why do you come to me with any such talk? I don't know him; I do not, and I will not have you say I do. A stranger he is to me. Call on me! Absurd, absurd! I don't know him!"

Abram poured out the denial with eager but tremulous speech, and his person shook as much as his voice. His face did not get its color back, and its ghastly hue was surprising and striking.

"It is infamous for you to say he called here!" he declared.

"Infamous? Isn't that a rather strong word to apply to a simple call? What if he did come? Is that anything that need to scare you?"

"I am not scared."

"You look it."

Abram saw that his haste to deny the charge had led him into exaggerations, and he made a desperate effort to rally and act more like himself. Surely, he had made a serious mistake to get so flustered.

"I don't like to have my word doubted; that's all," he replied. "I am in business, and to a man thus occupied his word is all in all. I hold my honor above all things, sir."

"No doubt, but let us skip that. Epsom Griggs was seen to call here, and proof of that fact is easily obtained. Now, what became of him?"

"If he called. I did not recognize him, nor did he give the name you claim for him. I do not know such a man."

"Didn't he stay here over night?"

"No, sir, no!" cried Abram, shrilly.

"It's very mysterious what has become of that man," asserted the caller. "He was seen to call, and it is thought you gave him a room for the night—"

"I did not; I did not, sir, and the man who says I did is an infamous liar!" cried the old man. "I know nothing about him; I never heard of him before. I never did—never, never!"

With this Abram leaped up out of his chair and flourished his arms so wildly around his head that he might well have been mistaken for a madman. So thought the caller, who was not, in himself, half so dangerous as Abram thought him, and he prudently rose.

"Of course," he said, edging toward the door, "if you say you have not seen him, that settles it—"

"Yes, yes; I have not seen him. Never heard of the man in my life. Never, never! Why, the name is all new. I never heard of him—"

Abram could not calm himself, and he would, perhaps, have gone on indefinitely with his denial had not the caller made a break for the outer door and gone out without the formality of a farewell.

The money-lender was left alone.

When he had recovered his calmness a little he muttered:

"My crime is known. I am doomed!"

While the visitor went to a hotel and wrote this letter:

"MR. CHARON:—Have seen Hamilton and will give full particulars if you will call this evening. If, as I suspect, you are a detective, let me say you will have to do your own work after this. I am poor, but I am not to be hired to again see a man who raved like a madman when I mentioned Epsom Griggs. Do your own work henceforth."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CROOK GETS A LESSON.

OVER the city was the hush which follows the end of business hours. In New York there is no hour, however, when pedestrians are not going and coming in numbers more or less numerous, and in the present case, it was not so late but what these night travelers were to be seen enough so there was company for all.

On the side streets, like that to which attention is now called, there was so little of life that each footstep was very distinct, and rare enough, too, to make it a novelty.

The feeble light of the gas lamps flickered and seemed pale and sickly, and the recesses around the old brick houses held dark shadows and imaginary shapes of menace.

Suddenly steps sounded quick and light and a girl ran into view with a man in swift pursuit. He was going with the speed of a sprinter, and even her young limbs did not suffice to keep her out of danger.

He gained and was about to seize her when another man started into view. To them his appearance seemed almost unnatural, though it was matter-of-fact enough, as he had been passing by chance.

He took the situation in at a glance and espoused the cause of the girl at once. She had almost run into his arms before she saw him, and he promptly threw his arms around her and confronted the pursuer.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded.

The pursuer stopped short and looked in dismay which grew into anger of a radical type.

"Nerve Nickol!" he exclaimed.

"That's my name," calmly answered the sport. "Now, Mr. Walton, why are you chasing Miss Peggy Benner?"

The leader of the Fancy Five gazed at Nick with a choking sensation in his throat which, however, only indicated the wrath aroused by what he was pleased to consider the meddling of the sport. He wanted to strangle this cool man from Rusty Gulch, but there were reasons why he did not proceed to it too hastily.

Answering the question he retorted:

"That is none of your business!"

"All right. Go along!"

"Go along?"

"That was what I said."

"Get out of the way!"

"The sidewalk is wide enough for us both. Go along!"

"Take your hands off from that brat."

"Miss Benner," spoke Nick, with formal politeness, "which of us do you choose?"

"I don't choose that mean skunk!" cried Peggy, plainly.

"I thought you would not. You hear her, Walton. Go along!"

"Are you a parrot, that you keep mouthing that order?" demanded Walton, hotly. "I tell you that you are not wanted here. You are meddling with what does not concern you, and I warn you not to keep it up. You have nothing to do with me or this girl, and if you interfere, you will take the consequences."

Belligerently the speaker advanced, when Peggy exclaimed:

"Don't let him touch me!"

Touch her he did, for Walton was not to be discouraged thus, and he hoped Nick would give up when he saw how much in earnest he was, but the result was very unpleasant for Mr. Walton.

Nick promptly knocked him down.

The leader of the Fancy Five leaped to his feet, wild with rage.

"You dog!" he snarled, "you shall pay dearly for that."

"Good fer you, Nick!" exclaimed Peggy, "you hit him a smasher, an' he got what he deserved."

The sport still had his left arm around the

girl. While engaged in knocking the fellow down he had shifted his cane with easy unconcern but it was now back in his right hand, and he did not seem to feel the least concern over the hostile demonstration. Walton, however, considered himself a pugilist of the highest rank, and he was bound to show it. He advanced threateningly.

"Keep off!" warned Nerve Nickol, "or there will be trouble for a New York crook of about your size."

"We will see. Take that!"

Walton had put up his hands in scientific style, and as he spoke he aimed a tremendous blow at Nick's head.

The cane dropped from Nick's grasp lightly, and his hand came up at the same moment. The blow was warded off, and then he released his hold on Peggy and took a more active part in proceedings. His assailant was not to be driven off, and he began to shower blows upon the man from Rusty Gulch.

In a short time Walton had the unpleasant feeling that he had tackled a big job. Somehow, he could not get the blows beyond the guard which was so neatly interposed, and, as he had not given Nick credit for any knowledge of the art of boxing, he was a good deal demoralized by the pretty defense.

"I'll smash a hole right through your head!" he declared, furiously.

"Go right on and do it!" repeated the sport, coolly.

"Take that!"

"Sorry, but you didn't seem to connect."

Peggy had been watching eagerly. She knew of Walton's reputation as a boxer, and she had felt no confidence in her defender's ability to match the city rounder, but the result gave her courage.

"Say, you've got him, Nick!" she asserted. "You're a dandy with your dukes. Go right in an' wax him. You kin do et ef you try. Aha! that was a cuckoo!"

She executed a dance in her excitement, and the "cuckoo" to which she referred seemed to warrant it. Nick had ceased to be a defender, and had turned the tables and begun to make matters very warm for his enemy.

"Better give up," he suggested.

"I'll have you yet!" panted Walton.

"You have me *now*, dear man!" lazily remarked Nickol. "Do you want more of me? Now, if I should gently tap your nose—Oh! excuse me, sir; I must have hit harder than I intended."

He had hit hard enough to draw the blood from Walton's nose, anyhow, and it was a severe shock to the crook.

"I will avoid that point," added the sport. "Now, if I were to touch your eye gently—Pardon me, perhaps I was too rough. Kindly pardon me!"

It was adding insult to injury, for he had almost driven the eye through Walton's head, the latter thought, and the assailant grew weak and groggy.

"You fiend!" he gasped.

"Did I hurt?" asked Nick, with the same lazy utterance. "You must be a trifle delicate. Now, your teeth must be well rooted—My dear sir, you will please excuse me. Surely, your chin bone must be hung on with secure rivets, and—Ah! *it holds!*"

Rough was the last round for Walton. Nick had made his teeth rattle as if all were coming out, and this was followed by the blow on the jaw which knocked Walton to the sidewalk and left him sprawling there.

The man from Rusty Gulch had revealed remarkable science, and utterly demolished his foe. Walton lay still, groaning and breathing heavily. The last blow, like the jaw, had "held," as Nick expressed it, and the fight was over.

"Glory!" cried Peggy, "you are a corker, an' I'm proud ter know ye!"

"Thanks, Miss Peggy."

"He's stunted, he is."

"Oh! I reckon not; this was only a friendly set-to!"

"Jee-whiz! what would you call an unfriendly one?"

"Walt, old chap, let me help you up," kindly added Nick. "I trust you did not hurt yourself when you fell."

He pulled the crook to a sitting position, and Walton sat there with his head in his hands. Other footsteps now sounded, and

two persons approached from different directions.

"Tony Pierson!"

"Plum Gilder!"

The names were uttered, the one by Nick and the other by Peggy, and almost simultaneously, and those who had been mentioned came forward quickly.

"Hullo!" quoth Plum, "what fer a show is this? Been havin' a pugilistic encounter, b'jinks! an' Walt has got the worst of it. Say, sport, you must hev hit him with a cleaver; he looks all groggy an' mutilated."

"He brought it upon himself."

"Does he like the sample?" asked Plum, facetiously.

Tony had been using his eyes, and he now broke forth:

"What in perdition does this mean?"

"He tried to kill me!" groaned Walton.

"Gammon!" exclaimed Peggy.

"Couldn't you take care of yourself, Walt?" demanded his ally.

"Oh! if I had been allowed an equal chance! If I had only had a revolver!"

"I have one."

"Shoot him!"

"Mister," said Nick, "if you are hanker-ing for a revolver argument it is not too late. Why can't we step out on a quiet pier and have this all settled? We have seconds right at hand, and I know we should enjoy the diversion. How is it, do we fight?"

"Yes."

"All right; a duel it is!" lightly exclaimed the sport.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DUELISTS PROCEED TO BUSINESS.

PLUM GILDER shook his head.

"Hev you gone clean crazy?" he demanded. "Why, the perleece would run ye in afore you could say Jack Robinson, or any other Jack."

"We will risk it. Tony, get your friend on his trotters, for we can lose no time. A duel it is!"

Nerve Nickol spoke with cheerfulness which made Tony wish himself out of the whole business. He had held the sport in awe before, and the proof of his prowess presented by the mangled visage of the chief of the Fancy Five more than ever convinced the race-track worker that it would be prudent to let well enough alone.

"I will have no part of it," he asserted.

"Walt, let us get out of this before a cop comes along."

"I will fight him!" persisted Walton.

"Then you are a fool!"

"Right you are, Anthony," agreed Plum.

"I'll have nothing to do with it. Who ever heard of a duel on a New York pier?"

"My dear, sir," replied Nick, "nothing is too strange to be true. Does it take long to have such a set-to? Not hardly a minute. We can get boats so we can leave the scene as soon as we are done, and if a dozen policemen are on the way not one will get at us. While they seek to do so we will row gayly away."

"Yes, an' they'll row after ye," grumbled Plum.

"Walton, is it a go?"

"Yes."

"The maddest scheme I ever heard of!" cried Tony.

Tony was right, but he and Plum were the only ones who looked at the matter in a thoughtful and sensible light. Walton was maddened by his discomfiture, and Nick was not a New Yorker, and did not see how wild the plan was. But both he and Walton held to their purpose, and it was decided that it should go on.

"How about this girl?" asked Nick.

"Peggy, why was Walton chasing you?"

"He tried to persuade Pop Benner ter shut me up, which he wouldn't do, so when Walton ketched me out alone he jest went fer me."

"He has seen that he can't run the whole city of New York," calmly commented the sport. "Peggy, run home now—I reckon it will be safe. Or Plum can escort you."

"Jee-whiz! I want ter see that duel, b'jinks!" asserted Plum.

"I'll go along; I ain't afeered," replied Peggy. "You take keer of Nick, Plum."

She hastened away, and the would-be duelists got to work.

"What are the terms?" inquired Walton.

"I have two revolvers with me," exclaimed Nick. "Also, I have cartridges, both loaded and blank. We will load one weapon with the blank ones, and one with the deadly ones. Thus, one man will be defenseless, while the other will have the means of firing six shots at his foe. He will thus be able to make a sure thing of it."

"But it will be murder!" cried Tony.

"All duels are murder."

"I don't like it."

"Walton and I are satisfied, so it will be all right. Now, let us wander down to the pier and make all ready. You, Tony, and Plum shall load the revolvers, one with deadly cartridges and the other with blanks, and then Walton shall take his pick, not knowing which is which. Come on, and let us have this over."

Both the "seconds" remained unwilling, but Nick was as easy as ever, and Walton was bound to risk something for the sake of getting his revenge.

Down to the river they went, and, as their course took them to the temporarily-deserted pier before mentioned in these pages, they had no one to molest them at the start.

Dark and silent was the pier, and no policeman was to be seen.

"Go about your work," directed Nick, with a motion to the seconds. "Let us get this off our hands so we can go to bed."

"Thunder! but ain't you game?" exclaimed Plum.

"Oh! this is an old trick at Rusty Gulch."

"Count me out o' that section, then. But, say, ef we monkey 'round here, some gavus will hev us by the necktie, an' we want ter git out o' the 'dif.' without that. With two crazy men ter care fer, Tony an' me hev our grips about full."

"Take the revolvers and go to the further side of the pier."

The seconds went, after having due directions as to the cartridges, but they were not in love with the job any more than before.

"Walton," pursued the sport, "I see a boat in the dock here, so the problem of getting something of the sort is easily settled, when the police come rushing this way, brought by the sound of firing, all we have to do is to skip. There is room for all but that one of us who will be dead. Of course a process of arrest will be inoperative against him, and he can stay."

"Yes."

Walton did not answer so coolly as before. He began to realize what he had undertaken.

"I suppose you are a dead shot?" added Nick.

"I am."

Walton said it readily, but he had some doubt. He noticed that his hand trembled, now.

"We shall have to fire in the dark, of course."

"I—I had not thought of that."

"But we can't miss. I have tried it often."

A cool breeze swept up the river from the Bay, but, somehow, when Walton brushed his hand across his forehead it was wet by the perspiration which had gathered there.

He had not tried shooting in the dark.

"Wouldn't it be well to wait until light?" he asked, feebly.

"We don't need it."

"But I think—"

"Of course we shall advance at pleasure," added Nick, calmly. "Now, I have a notion that I shall get the loaded revolver, and, if I do not hear the whistle of a bullet at your first fire, I shall advance and make it a short job. It will prevent the survivors from being arrested and, of course, it does not matter to the dead man just when he falls."

"Fiend!"

The word was formed in Walton's throat, but was not uttered. Power of utterance failed him, so much was he moved. He remembered his foe's reputation for "game-ness," and this exhibition of cool unconcern was rending to the nerves now.

There was a call from the other side of the pier.

"All's ready here, gents!" announced Plum.

"They have left the two revolvers lying on the pier," added Nick. "Go, Walton, and take your pick."

He had waived all possible advantage, but Walton was slow about moving. He was not a coward, ordinarily, but it was clear he was now thoroughly scared.

"Go!" pursued the sport.

Walton went. He found the weapons. Side by side they lay, but he hesitated to make the selection. He cast an imploring glance toward Tony. Plum saw the motion of his head and called out briskly,

"We've mixed 'em up so even we don't know which is which. You'll hev ter take yer chances, mister. Jee-whiz! I begin ter like this racket! Great stuff, ain't et, Tony?"

But Walton, bending over the revolvers, did not think so. Which one was safe—which held death?

Terrible decision!

Would he seal his own doom by the choice?

Like a leaf shook his hand, but he suddenly stirred to action and seized one of the pair. Nick came forward lightly and took the other.

"Now for the last act," he added.

The duelists took their positions and all was ready.

"Tony, you can give the word," directed Nick. "You have only to count 'one, two, three,' and we fire at the last word. See?"

"Yes."

"I am ready. How is it with you, Walton?"

The chief of the Fancy Five did not reply. He was shaking like a leaf all over now, and the barbarity of the thing was almost as potent in his sight as the danger. To stand there in the dark and fire by guess—perchance to hold the wrong revolver and be shot like a defenseless dog—it was simply appalling.

His breath seemed to come like the last gasp of man, and he could not have told whether he held the revolver or not.

"Tony?" spoke Nick.

"Yes?"

"Count!"

Huskily the race-track man uttered,

"One!"

Walton dashed down his weapon.

"No!" he gasped, "I can not, will not! Take part in such a deed as this? Never, never! I am not going to be butchered; I will not fight!"

"But it is too late—"

"It is not too late. Jupiter: am I only an ox that I should be cut up here? Fight? No, no; I will not!"

"Can it be," coldly asked the sport, "that you are a coward?"

"Call it what you will, I will not fight. Why, it would be simple butchery. I won't think of it."

"Then you back out?"

"Call it what you will I say; I will not engage in any such atrocity."

"If you are afraid, of course that settles it."

Irritating to an extreme was the manner, as well as the words of the sport, but Walton grew stronger now his decision was made. If he lacked the nerve to fight he had the strength to refuse.

"Wal, this is measly luck!" quoth Plum Gilder. "Jest when the prospects of fun seemed the brightest the bottom drops out o' the whole blamed biz! I call it mean!"

"Tony, let us be off," said Walton.

"All right."

Tony made haste to walk up beside his chief, and they hastened to leave the pier.

"Do ye allow that, Nick?" asked Plum, disconsolately.

"Yes, we may as well humor them."

"No fight, eh?"

"No."

"Say, I s'pose I might take a hand in with ye, jest fer the fun o' the thing. I ain't no great on the shoot, but ez a personal favor I will fight ye."

"I'll think of it, pard, but let us skip, now. Our late companions might decide to tell some lie to the police and get us into hock."

"Right, an' we'll skip. But, say, Nick, you just made that critter wilt like a wet rag. B'jinks! when I grow up I'll wear my hair long an' see if I kin raise a nerve like yours. Ef I kin, I'll be all hunk!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SPORT'S GREATEST VICTORY.

THE next morning Nerve Nickol made his appearance at the house of Abram Hamilton, money-lender. There was nothing in the looks or manner of the sport to tell of the exciting scenes of the previous night. He was now faultlessly dressed, and, withal, appeared as fresh as the dainty flower he wore in the button-hole, of his coat.

He rung at the bell and was duly admitted, not by a servant, but by the daughter of the house. Whether she chanced to be there, or had observed him approaching from a distance was a question.

"Good-morning, Miss Amy," he lightly spoke. "Is Mr. Hamilton in?"

Amy had long since given up the idea of impressing on his mind the fact that her father had regular hours when he was not in, for she understood very well that the fact that he always came when he knew Abram was out meant something.

"He is not in," she now replied, "but if you will wait he will soon come."

"Then I will wait."

They went to the parlor and sat down. General conversation followed. Amy found more and more pleasure in Mr. Nickol's society, and this had been especially the case since the dark doubts called up by the mystery brought to her attention by Susan had been worrying her.

Nick was always gay, and his manner lightened her own spirits.

On this occasion he was unusually genial, and he wandered from subject to subject with careless ease which seemed to show that his own mind was wholly at ease.

"By the way," he remarked, at last, "I am thinking of leaving New York soon."

Amy felt her color change.

"Are you?" and she tried to make her tone matter-of-fact.

"Yes."

"Have you tired of city life?"

"That is about it."

"Do you return to Rusty Gulch?"

"Yes."

"No doubt that will be pleasant for you."

"That depends. You see, when I am at Rusty Gulch I lack congenial company. The people there are all right in their way, but something seems missing. I am a true child of Nature, Miss Amy, and when I used to go out in the mountains or in the valley I loved to see Nature in all her glory. Yet, there was something lacking."

"Indeed!"

"There was, Miss Amy. The brook never sung so musically, the cliffs were never so grand, the sky was never so blue, and the murmur of the wind was never so soothing but there was a longing back of it."

"Even though you were in Rusty Gulch?"

"Even so. I did not know then, Miss Amy, what it was that was missing from life. I have learned, since. In New York the riddle has been read, and my eyes are opened. By what power was it done, do you think?"

Amy's face had flushed and her eyes were cast down. Nerve Nickol had undergone some change, all of a sudden. He was not the same careless person of old, and there was that in his manner which made her flush and then hate herself for flushing.

"Perhaps you like hotel life better here than there," was her artful surmise.

"The hotel is all right and the bills all wrong," admitted Nick, "but that is not it. I found the missing part of my life right in this house. Miss Amy, I am a blunt fellow, I know, and I can't get at this as a city gallant would, but I want to say that you are the lacking link in my existence."

"I?"

"Yes."

"I do not see—"

"I do; I see, and seeing, I should be blind if I did not worship. Miss Amy, there are women by the million in this world of ours, but, to me, there is but one worth looking at. I look at you; I see the beauty of your face, your mind and your soul, and the better part of my nature rises to meet your many noble qualities as the heathen kneels to his god. Poor and humble he may be, but his homage is all powerful; it is the breath of his life, and the glory of his soul. Miss Amy, do you see what all this is to me?"

"You surprise me, Mr. Nickol."

He did not surprise her, but she was excusable for saying so.

"Do I displease you?"

"Why, no; for I feel sure you mean all you say."

"Mean it? The thought I have given you surges through my being like the life-blood that leaps in my veins. What does it mean? Why, that I love you; that your life is bound up in mine; that the song of the brook, the murmur of the winds and the blue of the sky will never bring vague regret again if you will say the words I want to hear; that I love you with devotion and ask you to be my wife!"

He paused and looked at her as if expecting an answer, but as none came he went on in a less reliant way:

"I know I am unworthy of you, but this much I can see. A man may be unworthy; he may be sadly lacking in all that he should have, but when he brings his love to the woman of his choice he does all that human devotion can do. Poor and mean he may be, but, even at that, there is a glory in his love, since it is the loftiest homage which can be paid to woman."

"Indeed you are right, Mr. Nickol, but why do you speak of meanness and lowness? What have they to do with this?"

"I was afraid you would think that of me."

"No, no! Think that of a friend? Never, never! Friendship is the noblest of human ties, since it is the one unselfish tie, and it carries with it lofty attributes and demands for kindness which no power on earth can deny or defy."

"But I am a plain Western man—"

"Are you the worse for that?"

"I'm afraid I am."

"Banish your fear, for it is groundless."

"So much for friendship, but some friendships ask more than that. I have asked more. Did you hear me?"

Eagerly his gaze sought hers, but she looked downward.

"Yes," she admitted.

"And your answer—what is it?"

"Do you realize that we have been acquainted but a short time?"

"In love one should never count by days; 'tis the pulsations of the heart that tell the story."

"But it is well to be sure the heart will always pulsate as it does when the words of understanding come."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that, while I am far from wishing to say No to you, I see the highly important need of that degree of delay which will assure to both of us that there has been no error made."

"And may I hope?" cried Nick, in delight.

She did not answer. She did more; she raised her gaze, and he read that there which made him seize her in his arms.

"Now I live!" he declared.

He did live, and so did Amy, but it was some time before their conversation was really coherent. For this he was chiefly responsible, and he gave such painful evidence of wandering on indefinitely that she finally changed the subject a little.

Ever since he had told her of Rusty Gulch, and drawn such glowing pictures, she had been thinking of the place where he had, as she supposed, such great money interests, and the latest developments had made her more interested than ever.

"What do you think your friends are doing in Rusty Gulch?"

Nick thought he could make a close guess. Allowing for the difference of time they must, nevertheless, be hard at work, one and all, the men in the mines and the women at home; while all were being nearly roasted by the sun which beat down so mercilessly on the barren rocks and the shining sands of that place of desolation.

He did not confess that, but, with a twinge of remorse, suggested that all were doubtless busy.

"I wish," added Amy, "that we were now at Hercules Pass."

"Where is that?"

"Why, don't you know?" asked Amy, in surprise.

Nerve Nickol quickened his wits. He remembered the glowing account he had given.

her of the mountain town, and he remembered, too, that he had then named all the things of interest about it, but, alas! he had applied names of which the residents had never heard, and which he had never thought of since, so they were wholly gone from his mind. He began to feel worried.

He forced a laugh and replied.

"Of course I know, but you see there is another pass of the name at Pigeon Drift, so I was not sure."

"Let me see—what were the names of the big peaks?"

"Oh! Rattlesnake Hump, Starvation Hill, and so on."

"Indeed, that is not right!" declared Amy. It was, but it would never do to admit it.

"I want to see if you remember," he answered.

"Well, I do remember Mount Babel, Mammoth Mount and Mount Terrible."

"Terrible, indeed!" thought unlucky Nick.

"And the name of the big valley," cried Amy, suddenly, "what was that?"

It was Dead Man's Flat, but he knew he had not given that name when he described it to her.

"Have you forgotten?" he asked, reproachfully.

"Indeed, I have not; it is Eden Valley."

"Good!" declared Nick. "You remember finely."

"Now, you must take your turn!" she added, lightly. "Let me see if you remember the names of the streams."

He did. He remembered Muddy Run, Malaria Creek and Slim Jim's Brook, but it would never do to confess it.

"No, no! It was I who told it before it is your turn now," he persisted. "See if you can tell."

"How about Sylvan Stream, Paradise Brook and Queen Run?"

He was watching her closely, and the slight twinkle in her eyes put him on his guard. He hazarded a bold denial.

"No, no; that is wrong. Have you forgotten?"

"Paradise Run, Elysian Brook, Nectar Creek and Thunder River," she promptly explained.

"Nobly done. I am proud of your memory."

He ventured the guess, to himself, that she was sincere, this time, and he was not wrong, but all these dangers had worked on his nerves too much for comfort, and he made haste to change the subject.

When he left the house, somewhat later, he was about as angry with himself as he could be.

"Why did I go and tell her all this stuff?" he wondered. "It's bound to come out, and it'll ruin me. I don't know those confounded names, even now. Thunder Peak, Nectar Valley, Babel Brook—Jupiter! they are all gone out of my mind. Confound the whole lot of them!"

CHAPTER XXII.

A REMARKABLE CASE.

THAT night Amy retired with thoughts of Nerve Nickol in her mind, and she fell asleep to dream of him. To her, the world seemed to have undergone some great change and to be a brighter world than ever before. Tender was her face while she remained awake, and happy her smile when she slept.

Love was responsible for this, but it is one of the grim facts of life which cannot be evaded that even in the midst of love people are often beset with things far from romantic.

It was so with Amy. She awoke, and she found herself so disagreeably hungry that she turned her thoughts from Nickol to the pantry. More, she turned her steps in the same direction.

Putting on a wrapper she left her room and started toward the Mecca of her hopes.

Penurious as Abram Hamilton was he had one notion which cost some money, and that was not to have the house wholly dark at night. The lights in the two principal halls were left dimmed, and this made Amy's present course not one of wandering in the gloom, nor of lighting of gas as she went.

Lightly she descended the stairs which led to the hall of the parlor floor. As she

reached the hall and turned around the corner of the balustrade she came face to face with a man.

It was not Hamilton; it was not any one who had a right to be in the house.

She stopped short, after a frightened start, and he did precisely the same thing. For a moment they looked into each other's eyes, and then he calmly resumed his way and would have passed her. Amy was no coward, and, when the first shock was over, she rallied with commendable spirit and spoke sharply.

"What are you doing here, sir?"

"I am going up!"

The unknown made the reply very deliberately—indeed, he spoke on an exact monotone, and like a machine.

"Going up where?" she demanded.

"To my room."

"You have no room here."

"Oh! yes, I have."

"Pray, how did you get it?"

"Why, I live here," replied the man, still using the peculiar monotone, the same machine-like utterance.

"Do you think to deceive me thus?"

"I do not seek to deceive you."

"You are a burglar."

"Do you jest with me, Miss Morgan?"

"My name is not Morgan, and you need not resort to any more lies. You are a burglar, and I have caught you in the act."

"Very good joke," remarked the man in his monotone.

"We will see if it is a joke. Here! come with me!"

Amy could not understand, afterward, where her courage came from at that moment, but she seized the man by the arm and began to push him along with the intention of conducting him to her father's room.

At the touch of her hand, however, a marked change came over him. The utterly vacant expression which had been on his face disappeared, while he gave a sudden start and then looked around him in bewilderment.

"Where am I?" he demanded, with a show of confusion.

"The question is well asked," replied Amy, with sarcasm.

"This is not where I live."

"So you confess, do you?"

"My dear young lady, what have I done?"

"You have entered this house as a burglar!" was the clear information.

"Impossible!"

"Then why are you here?"

"Miss, I am unfortunate—"

"You will be more than ever convinced of the fact when you find yourself in a cell, to-morrow."

"Allow me to explain—"

"What new falsehood have you to tell?"

"Will you kindly hear me? I am unfortunate enough to be a sleep-walker, and—"

"Do you think I will believe that?"

"It is the sad truth, and I can only infer that I have this night committed some terrible offense while in this condition. How I came into your company I do not know; I knew nothing until you aroused me from sleep by having hold of my arm. Did you not see a sudden change in me?"

"I did, and I will give you credit for being a good actor. I see it all, now. When you found yourself caught you resorted to this trick. It may be new, but it is not skillful. Still, how could you do better when caught in a burglarious attempt?"

"Miss, I give you my word of honor I am not a burglar, nor am I here with any illegal object. I am an honest and respectable man, and if you will allow me to go free I will return to my home—"

"What burglar would not?"

"Will you not listen to me?" demanded the stranger, with an earnestness which told he was sincere in one thing if not in any other. "I swear to you that I am an honest man, and if you let me go you will do a good deed. Far be it from me to take property not my own, and I wish to escape all censure. A sleep-walker is a most unfortunate being at the best—"

"You are not a sleep-walker!"

"My dear young lady—"

"There, that will do. I want no more of your 'dear young lady.' I do not bear that relation to you, and if any one else does, she is to be pitied."

"But my story—"

"Is all false. When I first met you suddenly you gave a start of alarm just the same as I did. Then a blank look came into your face and you made a clumsy attempt to carry out the role of sleep-walker. It will not answer with me, and I am going to have you arrested. I will call for help—"

"In Heaven's name, forbear!" cried the intruder, imploringly.

"You can explain to the judge. I will now call—"

"One moment! Spare me! Let me name a person who will assure you I am not what you allege. It is somebody you know."

"Impossible! Who should it be that I know?"

The intruder looked down and said nothing. Amy was all the while growing less afraid of him, and she now asked with sarcasm:

"Can't you think of the name of this person who knows you so well that he is sure of your honesty?"

"Miss, if I could persuade you to defer hearing his name—"

"You cannot. The name, sir; the name!"

"It is Norman Nickol!"

"What?"

"It is Norman Nickol!"

"Do you think this falsehood will avail you—"

"Wait!" was the almost imperious command. "Now that it is out, we need not go in the dark any longer. I am ready to tell all. Hear my own name, for, possibly, you have heard it before. I am Joseph Jones!"

"What! the valet?"

"I am Mr. Nickol's valet," was the steady reply.

"And here?"

"You will yet believe I was right when I said I was unfortunate. The misfortune of being a sleep-walker is a great one, I assure you; and you do not know how much sorrow this night's work gives me, but you can easily prove my innocence of all wrongdoing. If you positively will not take my word for it, send for Mr. Nickol."

"Can I believe you?"

"Send for Mr. Nickol!"

"But this seems incredible—"

"Send for Mr. Nickol!"

Amy gazed closely at the man for some time. To her he had the appearance of an Englishman, and such she had always heard Nick say his valet was, but she had no proof that this man was not trying to deceive her completely. He might be some one who had learned enough about affairs to be able to make a false claim.

"I think," she remarked, presently, "that my best way is to hand you over to the police and let them settle the whole matter themselves."

"Miss Hamilton, I beg that you will not do this. Do not make me more responsible for my misfortunes than I ought to be. Please send for Mr. Nickol."

"How can I, at this hour?"

"Have you no messenger?"

"None."

"There is a telegraph office near the corner of the street. Why can't you summon a servant and send him there?"

"It might be done, I suppose—"

"Do it, I beg of you!"

The intruder was very much in earnest, and by using Nickol's name he had appealed to Amy's most vulnerable point of nature. She hesitated, wavered, was urged further, and finally agreed to the proposition.

Susan was called, given a written message, and, much to her surprise, sent to the telegraph office. When she returned Amy kept her for company, and the two women and the intruder sat down to wait.

It was a remarkable situation, and the manner of the stranger showed that he did not like it, but he never lost his polite and deferential bearing, and nothing disagreeable occurred.

Sooner than was to be expected footsteps were heard outside the door and Amy, looking through the side-light, saw Nerve Nickol. Before he could ring she opened the door, and the sport walked in. His face had an anxious expression, for he had been

given no clue to the situation in Amy's note, and he spoke hurriedly:

"What is wrong?"

Then his gaze wandered and he saw Amy's burglar. If Amy answered Nick did not hear her. The moment he saw the man his face became full of wonder which amounted to amazement. He gazed and could neither hear nor speak.

The intruder rose.

"Mr. Nickol," he plaintively requested, "will you say a word for me, sir?"

"Thunder and lightning!" exclaimed Nick. "What are you doing here?"

"This is a most unfortunate affair, sir, but I trust you will bear witness to my good intentions, and let me prove that I have no ill will or evil intentions on anybody, sir."

"Joseph Jones," cried the sport, "what are you doing here?"

"It is all along of my unfortunate habit of walking in my sleep," replied Joseph, meekly. "I am a most unfortunate man with a physical infirmity. As a sleep-walker I have had to endure much—"

"What has that to do with this question? I asked you how you happened to be here?"

"I walked in my sleep—"

"And brought up here? Well, that may be all right, but the notion which strikes me just now is that the explanation is most mighty thin!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE MYSTERY OF JOSEPH.

NERVE NICKOL spoke with the emphasis of a blunt man called upon to credit more than he could readily do, but Joseph Jones remained as meek as ever.

"I beg, sir, that you will listen to me, for I am not deserving of censure; pity is what I deserve, as all the unfortunate of this world are similarly deserving—"

"Joseph, take a breath and then let your tongue have a rest, or that long sentence will choke you."

"Mr. Nickol, is this really your valet?" asked Amy.

"It is, by George! It's the only and original Joseph Jones, imported Britisher and immaculate gentleman to a gentleman. I am a good deal dazed by all this, and Joe will never get his long sentences into ship-shape. If you know anything about this, Miss Amy, spit it out."

"I found him wandering about this house, to-night—"

"The dickens you did!"

"And I took him for a burglar—"

"Thunder! why I would as soon have thought it of myself. Joe, oh! Joe, how could you, when you had the honor of the Nickol family on your shoulders?"

"I came here in my sleep. Sir, deal leniently with me, I implore you, for I am a most unlucky man—"

"Cut and deal again," suggested Nick.

"I want this whole story, so I can know whether I hold four aces or a bob-tail flush."

In his bewilderment the sport was forgetting that he was in the presence of a lady, and his language smacked strongly of Rusty Gulch, but no one there was in a mood to criticise language unless it became radically strong. Nick turned to Amy and again asked for an explanation, and she gave it as clearly as possible.

The sport looked astounded.

"Well, I'll be hanged if I thought you were such a crooked old stick as this, Joe!" he exclaimed.

"Am I to blame, sir?"

"Well, if you're not I'm a liar; that's all. Oh! Joe, Joe, how could you so forget the Nickol honor?"

"Have I not told you—"

"Yes, you have told me, but this sleep-walker biz don't go down for a cent. If your yarn is correct you left the hotel in your sleep, wandered here, broke in some way—the Lord knows how, but I don't—and then cantered around here like a yearling colt in pasture. I've heard of sleep-walkers before, but you can give cards and spades to the whole outfit and then yank the boodle like a three-time winner."

Joseph looked shocked, but he did not let the matter rest. He persisted in his claim and argued with such eloquence that made an impression. Susan was the first to yield.

She had become interested in this good-looking valet, and did not want to see him go to prison.

"I don't believe he is guilty of wrongdoing," she said, to Amy, "and if he is it will ruin him wholly to go to prison. He is too nice to be guilty, I think, and if he is, he must be sorry. Even if he is wicked, it might be worse than that."

Susan's argument was not wholly clear to the casual mind, but she had done Joseph good. Her sympathy aroused that of another woman, and with Joseph standing there so polite, meek and respectful it was hard to insist that he must go to the Tombs and be locked-up with a serious charge against him.

"Mr. Nickol," said Amy, finally, "why not give him another chance?"

"Another chance to raid your house?"

"No, no; I do not mean that. Another chance to reform."

"Reforms are only skin deep, but if you say the word I will take him home with me and think it over."

"I say, pardon him."

"Bless you, miss!" cried Joseph.

Nick pulled his mustache reflectively.

"My judgment tells me this is a mistake."

"Try him, Mr. Nickol!"

"All right. Home we go, my gay Joseph, but you will have to walk the path of uprightness from this out or there will be a crash. Now, Joe, in this land of civilization it is not customary to call on young ladies at this hour, and we will wend our way toward home."

They went, but not until Joseph had thanked Amy with fervor which brought tears into Susan's eyes.

"What a dear, delightful man!" the servant murmured, when they were alone.

"For a burglar, yes," admitted Amy.

"He may have a mother, miss."

"Let us hope not."

"Any way, he is very nice looking."

"Susan Duff, I forbid your speaking of the disreputable person in kindness. We have spared him; now let him prove himself worthy of pity before we give it to him!" added Amy, severely.

While they were talking the two men were on their way back to the hotel, where they arrived in due time. Not a word had been said on the way, but when they were in Nickol's apartments he sat down and motioned his valet to a seat.

"Joe, you are a corker!" he exclaimed.

"I trust, sir, that you do not blame me," said Joseph, meekly.

"Blame you!"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it's a bit staggering to the sensitive nerves to know I am employing a thief."

"A thief, sir?"

"What else?"

"Mr. Nickol, I assure you I did not enter that house with any such motive, sir."

"Joseph, we are told that a whale swallowed Jonah, and I am some in that line of business, myself, but this is a bit more than I can swallow. Sleep-walkers there are, but none who go out and break into houses on your plan. It won't go down, Joseph!"

The valet sighed deeply.

"My infirmity!" he murmured. "Ah! how unfortunate I am!"

"Now, old man, let us go right into the merits of this. It seems you did not have a chance to pack up the silverware, so there is a general disposition to let you off lightly, but I want to know all about your business. How much can you put in bank in a year as a burglar?"

"Nothing, sir; nothing."

"Then I'll be hanged if it is worth the risk. A business that don't pay is a mighty poor one, and not worth one's time. Tell me all about it. How long have you been a burglar? Why are you one? Don't be afraid to spit it right out. I am not a dove-eyed angel, myself, and I can sympathize with you."

"Mr. Nickol, I give you my word of honor that I am not a burglar, and never was. I did not enter that house with any such object, and I am deeply sorry that anything of the kind occurred. I am a sleep-walker, and you must know how unhappy my lot is."

"What in thunder should take you to Hamilton's?"

"Sir, I think I can explain it in a measure.

You have sent me there with flowers on several occasions, so I knew of the house, of course. Then, sir, I have been worried about you."

"The dickens you have!"

"Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"You have enemies."

"How do you know?"

"On one occasion, quite by accident, I noticed two men following you, and their looks and manner were so ominous that I followed them in turn."

"What came of it?"

"I saw them dog you to Hamilton's."

"Who were they?"

"Fortunately, I heard them call each other by name, so I am able to answer the question. One was named Walton; the other, Tony."

"Joseph, what do you know of them?"

"Nothing, sir, except that they have been following you."

"Aren't you a bit late in telling me of this?"

"It was my wish to learn more of them, so I could tell much at one time, and thus win your good will, sir, but I have not succeeded; I am not able to say more of them. But I think this is why my mind turned to the Hamilton house when I walked in my sleep. Having seen you dogged there, my own steps took the same course unconsciously."

"This sounds well, but I am afraid you are a sad dog, Joseph. You have not been so attentive to business of late as you might have been. I have suspected that you were given to the use of whisky in undue quantities. Else why have you been so absent at times?"

"Indeed, sir, I am a total abstainer."

"One thing you are, Joe!"

"Yes, sir."

"A confounded mysterious fellow!"

"But I assure you—"

"And I assure you we had better go to bed. Let this rest for to-night, and I will decide whether I send you adrift or not. My own honor, Joseph, must be kept spotless."

"I will help you, sir."

"Well, I'll be hanged! You are a pretty chap for the job. So might old-time Dick Turpin have figured as a savior of honor. Let it rest for now, though. I'm going to bed to dream of your mystery."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WAGES OF CRIME.

THE next morning when Joseph came to his master he evidently expected a renewal of the talk between them on the events of the previous night, but not a word said Nerve Nickol.

The morning mail brought a note from Hamilton asking the sport to call and see him, and, as it bore postmark of the night before, it was clear it did not refer to the events in the house after dark.

"I shall have to go," thought Nick, "though I do not want to. I have seen that Abram is tiring of my prolonged delay in the matter of making the investments I spoke of when I first saw him, and I reckon he intends to bring me to time. Well, I am as much ready to invest as I shall be at all."

He took from his pocket a handful of money and counted it.

"Eleven dollars and sixty-three cents," he murmured, with a smile. "Shall I buy a dozen houses in Harlem, or a block of Central stock, or a brewery? True, eleven dollars is a bit short for the purpose, but it is all I have. Oh! Rusty Gulch, why can't I really have the things I claim to own there, and thus make good my boasts about Thunder Valley, Elysian Mount, Terrible Creek and all the rest? Hang it all! a stockholder feels mean when he don't even know the names of the things about home!"

Dismal was Nick's face, but he finally rallied and laughed at his misfortune.

"Wouldn't the men of Rusty Gulch feel merry over this, if they knew of it? Poor old Gulch!—all we can accumulate there is long hair, and some of us have to borrow combs to keep the links out of the flowing locks!"

Preparing, he went to Hamilton's house

where he was received by the master without delay.

"Mr. Nickol, I trust you are well this morning," was the greeting.

"I feel like a humming-bird, Abram."

"Glad to hear it, sir; very glad. Now, how about — ahem! how about the investments you were to make? Are you all ready?"

"Well, I have only eleven hundred dollars with me, just now," serenely replied the sport, "but the rest can be raised at any time. Have you something special to suggest?"

"I have."

"Name it."

"I suggest," spoke Abram, deliberately, "that you buy out all I own in New York, to the uttermost brick and rafter."

"The dickens!"

"Yes, sir; my property is all for sale, and I should be pleased to give you first chance. My real estate holdings are not immense; one hundred thousand dollars will buy all."

"But why should you sell?"

"I am going out of business."

"And then?"

"I may travel."

"The dickens you will!"

"This seems to surprise you."

"Well, if I locate in the city I should want the benefit of your advice at times."

"Buy me out and you shall at all times have my advice without cost to you!" declared Abram, eagerly.

"That's a fair offer, by Jove! but I am short of cash, and I do not wish to draw a check for so large a sum as one hundred thousand dollars."

"You can raise it from your possessions at Rusty Gulch?"

"Just as easy as I could fifty dollars," truthfully replied the sport.

"Then shall we close the bargain?"

"This week," replied Nick, "I am to be very busy, and I cannot give the desired attention to the matter, but in a few days I will look your holdings over. It would not surprise me if I became the possessor of your property, for I know you must have invested wisely."

Abram looked delighted and declared the last view was correct. He kept his caller an hour longer, describing all in detail, and Nick listened attentively.

When he went away he was full of wonder.

"What does this move mean? Abram sell out? Well, by Jove! I don't see the object. What does it mean? There must be a reason."

There was. Could he have followed Abram's own thoughts he would have found them in this line:

"Nickol must buy. He is a stranger, and I can get more out of him than any one else. Yes, he must buy, for I must leave New York. It is getting too hot for me here. I do not know when discoveries may come in regard to Epsom Griggs. I must leave New York forever."

The wretched old man rose and paced the room, his face full of anxiety and worry. Not yet had his conscience smitten him for the murder of Epsom Griggs, but his fears had become all active.

Believing that discovery menaced him immediately he was eager to leave the city, but not until business matters could be arranged.

"I must take my money!" he muttered. "Ah! I can't give that up. I have worked, schemed, saved, and spared no means to increase my hoard. Yes, yes; I must have my money along with me."

The miserable wretch did not pause to think that the groundwork of his possessions had been the money out of which he had wronged Epsom Griggs, years before, nor that he had recently saved it for a time by killing Epsom. He blamed that man for causing him to do murder, but repent he did not.

A servant appeared and announced that a gentleman wished to see Abram. A card accompanied the request, and on it was the name, "John Lowell," while in one corner was the penciled word, "mortgage."

This seemed clear to Abram, and he went to see the caller. It was Egbert Walton, but, as he was unknown to Hamilton, his mere presence did not waken any mistrust.

He was greeted cordially.

"I called on business," observed Walton.

"Yes, I understand; some mortgage."

"How so?"

"The word was on the card."

"By accident, then," answered Walton, with a smile, for he had put it there to lure Abram, and was well satisfied with his scheme.

"Well, sir, you say you came on business."

"Yes," answered Walton, calmly. "I want to speak of Epsom Griggs!"

Hamilton started nervously. The visit of another man who wanted to know about Epsom had caused him to decide to sell his New York property. Now came the fatal name again.

He sat gazing in silent dismay. Walton leaned forward and added impressively:

"Where is Epsom?"

On the former occasion Abram had denied all knowledge of the man named, and denied in vain. Now, he decided not to waste time. Rallying, as far as he was able, he responded:

"I don't know."

"You ought to."

"Why?"

"Because you were the last person who saw him."

"I have not seen him in weeks."

"Nor has anybody else."

"Then why do you expect me to know?"

"You deny that you do?"

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Hamilton, I am not one to waste time in fooling around, so let me come right to the point. When Epsom called on you, on that occasion, he did it after a full consultation with me and another friend of mine. He told us all about the very peculiar financial transactions he had had with you, and, as he expressed personal fear in approaching you, we agreed to back him up fully."

"So there was a conspiracy?"

"If you like to call it so, yes; there was certainly a union of three. My friend and I agreed to back him up, and, as a starter, we suggested that he come here and make a formal demand for the property out of which you had wronged him."

"I did not—"

"Skip all denials, sir, for they will be useless. Well, Epsom came here, and he was never seen to go out."

"He left in a short time."

"Alive?"

"How should he leave?"

"The question is, how *did* he leave? Abram, what have you done with our mutual friend?"

Thus far Hamilton had kept up the conversation well, but he had not at any time been firm. The fears before felt now assumed distinct form, and he had more to fight against than a phantom dread. Remembering the terrible secret he had hidden so long he shook with the new terror which was upon him, but he tried to brave it out.

Now, he began to feel a little courage. There had been no claim that Epsom had never left the house, and until there was suspicion aroused that this had been the case, he had fighting ground left.

"Wherever he is," Hamilton replied, "he is his own master. I made terms with him and he went his way."

"Made terms with him?"

"Yes."

"Explain!" cried Walton, frowning.

CHAPTER XXV.

ADVENTURESOME AMY.

WALTON spoke in a loud tone, and it was the misfortune of both men that he was overheard by another person than Abram Hamilton. Amy was passing the door at that moment, and, though the door was closed, she heard the clear, sharp command.

It was far from her nature to act the spy, but something led her to delay for a moment to discover who was with her father. She soon heard enough to justify her in remaining where she was, convinced that, at times, the part of a listener was justifiable.

"It is far from my purpose to make known all the details of a private talk with a third party," Abram answered, "but I will

say that I satisfied Mr. Griggs in all ways, and that he then left me and went his way."

"Do you mean that you paid him money?"

"I do not recognize your right to ask me that, but if it will do you any good I will say that I did pay him all I owed him."

"And he went—"

"I know not where. Our business was all settled."

"You paid him up?"

"Sir, I have already told you so."

"Then you lie!" cried Walton. "You did not pay him, for it is absurd to suppose you did. With this claim of yours Epsom Griggs's disappearance grows more mysterious, and the fiend only knows what you have done with him. No, you did not pay him, for all of his valuable papers, without which you surely would not pay him a cent, are still in my possession."

It was Hamilton's turn to be dismayed again.

"His papers?"

"Yes."

"What papers?"

"Do you remember the papers which passed between you and him, long ago, sir?"

"Yes."

"I have them now."

"I don't believe it!"

"It can be proved. Come to my house and I will show them to you. More, since Griggs has disappeared so mysteriously, and we can get no trace of him, if you want to buy those papers they are for sale."

Hamilton sat and watched his foe in moody silence. There had, however, a ray of hope come over him, and he believed that if he could treat with this man he would gain more than the money it would cost would represent.

"Have you those papers here?" he asked, finally.

"No."

"Bring them and I will—"

"I told you they were to be seen at my own house."

"Bring them here—"

"Emphatically, I will not. I am not a fighting man, and I am not going to run any risks. For all I know you have murdered Epsom Griggs—it was a startling speech both to Abram and Amy—"and I am not going to risk my life. Come to my house and you can see the papers. Then you can buy if you wish."

Hamilton considered the point. He knew he had to deal with a knave, but, much as he loved money, he thought it would be a good idea if he could treat with the fellow and secure all compromising documents.

"Where can I see you?" he asked, presently.

"At No. —East Nineteenth street."

"When?"

"This evening, if you wish."

"At what hour?"

"Oh! say nine o'clock."

"I will be there."

The compact was made, and when some details had been attended to Walton prepared to go. Then Amy retreated from her position by the door.

She was agitated by what she had heard, and, when once in her own room, she held her hand over her heart as if to still its rapid beating.

"What does this mean?" she wondered.

"What is this strange agreement—Yes, and who is this man Griggs who has disappeared so mysteriously?"

Her mind went back to the events revealed to her by Susan; the story of the disordered bed and the blood-stained pillow-case—and she was frightened.

"What does it mean?" she repeated.

Quickly she went over all she had heard, and then arrived at a decision.

"I am going to hear this talk of the evening!"

It was a rash decision, perhaps, and she did not fail to see that it might bring measureless trouble to her, but she was fixed in her resolution. Ever since Susan's story had led her to believe some man had gone to bed in their house and then disappeared strangely, leaving stains of blood behind him, she had been trying to think who, besides Abram Hamilton, could have put him into the room to sleep, and she had never gained any light.

Now, with this talk between Abram and Walton of a man who had disappeared so singularly, she was worried more than ever and bound to get light if she could.

"What does it mean?" she murmured. "I dare not think, but I will learn, if such a thing is possible."

When evening came she attired herself in plain old garments and was ready for the venture. She made no move until Hamilton went out, but did not delay in following him.

He had gone away with manifest nervousness of manner, and she was not more composed. With the arrival of the time she began to see the dangers which might come to her.

"Perhaps it is all a decoy," she thought. "Oddly enough, since he was a cautious man, usually, this idea had not occurred to Abram."

She did not attempt to follow her father direct, but her impatient, nervous steps were more rapid than she had thought, and she reached the vicinity of the place mentioned by Walton in time to see Hamilton enter.

The building was one which showed some signs of past elegance, and she began to think she might have trouble in attaining her object. She had a definite plan, however, and she proceeded to put it to the test.

Past experience had shown her that the class of New York workers who feel that, by virtue of the peculiar line of business they follow, they have a right to expect "tips"—that most ignoble of foreign innovations with which Americans are cursed—could, in most cases, as she believed, be bought up wholly by the use of money, and right there lay her hope.

After due survey she rung the basement bell.

The head of a man soon appeared on the inner side, and, after a scrutiny through the side-light, he opened the door.

"I think you've made a mistake, miss," he remarked.

"Why?"

"I mean, in the house."

"Why do you think so?"

"Ah! Ahem! Who do you want?"

"I want permission to enter this house, sir."

The man, who had the appearance of a servant, stared wonderingly.

"Sorry, but it can't be done."

"Do you see this?"

Amy revealed a bank-note of the value of ten dollars.

"Yes, I see it."

"How many of those must I give you to gain entrance?"

"Why do you want to come in?"

"Frankly, I wish to listen to the conversation between certain parties, one of whom you admitted only a few minutes ago."

"It won't go, miss."

"Name your terms for letting me in."

"Fifty dollars."

The servant smiled as he spoke, and it was clear he thought he had put the price so high there would be no more said about it, but Amy promptly produced more money.

"Here is the sum you name."

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he exclaimed.

"You see I mean business, and I trust you will accept my offer."

"Miss, I don't know what you are drivin' at but you have touched my feelings. It's a go, and you kin come in as soon as you wish. Oh! so you are here now!"

She had, indeed, entered promptly.

"Now, lead on so I can listen."

He looked down and meditated for some time.

"I'll do all I can for you, but this taking of your bribe makes it necessary for me to skip the tra-la-la as soon as possible. I can't serve two masters, and the result is that I am goin' to get out immediately. Before I go I will give you a few pointers. You will see that this hall is not furnished. Well, that is the case with pretty much the whole house."

"Why is that?"

"Fixed for the occasion, you see. The hall on the parlor floor, and that of the floor above, and one room there, too, are furnished, but that is all. You see, it is a cut-and-dried scheme."

Amy began to be worried.

"What is the object?"

"I don't know, except that the old gent has been decoyed in."

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SNARERS.

AMY stood in silence for some time. The last words were enough to awaken all her fears. Abram Hamilton had been "decoyed" in. It was not a pleasant word, and so much might be its train that she would have been excusable for retreating at once and wholly.

Then she rallied, determined not to forego her purpose. She had never given herself credit for the courage she then revealed, but go on she was bound to, let the result be what it might.

"Who is in the house?" she asked.

"A man and a woman."

"A woman?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"The man calls her Dolly. I know no more."

"You say there is only one man?"

"I have seen no more, but I have not been over the house."

"You have done your duty, and here is the money."

The servant was paid, and his eyes glistened.

"A pretty good day's work!" he exclaimed. "Now, see me skip!"

He did go out of the basement door without more delay. When he was gone, and it was too late to call him back, Amy was sorry she had not tried to hire him as a protector, but his face had not indicated that he would be a safe companion in that role. Perhaps it was just as well.

Summoning all her courage she went up the stairs, and found no trouble in locating the one furnished room. Voices sounded within.

She went close to the door and listened, and she found no trouble in distinguishing what was said. Her father's voice was the first of all she heard, but it was the tones of Walton that first came in plainness to her.

"Now we have gone so far, Hamilton," he said, "tell me what has become of Epsom Griggs."

"I told you," Hamilton replied, "that he left my house, and I did not know where he went."

"Which was not true."

"Sir, why do you quarrel with me over this point?" asked Hamilton, irritably.

"Because," declared Walton, "I think you have murdered Griggs!"

"Absurd!"

"He was bound to get the money from you, and he would not—"

"Let us drop this. You say you have papers to sell me. Produce them, and I will see if they are worth buying."

"I have no papers."

"What?"

"My claim about papers was all nonsense. I have none; I know of none; and do not care about any such trash."

"You have none?"

"So I said, sir."

"Then why did you tell me you had them?"

"To get you here. In plain words, Mr. Hamilton, you have fallen into a trap. I wanted you where I could deal with you about Epsom Griggs, and I took this way to make sure of you. Here you are, and you do not leave until we get to the rights of this matter. Epsom Griggs was my ally, and I am going to know what you have done with him. He was a cowardly man, and it would not have been hard for any one to get the best of him. I think that is what you did, and I also think you killed him to get him out of the way."

There was a moment's pause, and then Walton added more sharply:

"Stop, sir! You cannot leave this room!"

Amy heard the key click in the door, and then Hamilton's voice rose imploringly.

"Madam, let me pass, and I will pay you royally."

"You can pass when my friend says so, and not before," came close to the door in a woman's tones.

Plainly, the unknown "Dolly" was doing her part.

"I protest against this inhuman plot—"

"You protest in vain," declared Walton. "I am here for business. Epsom Griggs agreed to give me good, hard coin to help him beat you, and though he has vanished from the game I am going to go on. If he is dead, my claim still lives. More, if he is dead, it will take fifty thousand dollars to buy me off—that much from you, Abram Hamilton. You are not dealing with a weakling, sir, and I advise you to listen to reason and yield at once. You have heard the price."

"Fifty thousand!" murmured the woman.

"Infamous!" groaned Hamilton.

"Ha! ha! You are not dealing with Epsom now!"

"He deals now with a man who never loses!" proudly added Dolly.

"I will call the police."

"You will do nothing of the sort!" retorted Walton. "I have not undertaken this work to be defeated so easily. All my plans are carefully arranged, and you will kick in vain."

"You surely do not mean it—"

"I mean that you will never go forth a free man again until you do my bidding. Fifty thousand dollars is the price. Listen! This house is deserted by all but us. Any attempt on your part to resist my will would be the sheerest folly."

"I say I will call to the police!" declared Hamilton.

"Do you know what the result would be?"

"No."

"I should shoot you!"

"You dare not."

"I swear to do it. I have banked all on this scheme, and I shall not fail. Victory or death is my watchword. You may as well surrender and save your own life."

"This is a high-handed outrage, but it will not be successful. Yield to you? Never, never!"

"We will see. We are going to starve you into subjection, sir, and not a morsel of food will pass your lips until you do as I wish. Now you know my plan. What are you going to do about it?"

"I demand that you let me pass. Out of the way, woman!"

"I am here, too!"

Walton's voice now sounded close to the door, and it was plain that he had hurried forward and seized the money-lender. There was evidence of a struggle, and then Amy heard the croak speak again:

"You see how foolish all this is. You are an old man and I am young. Don't you see how weak you are?"

"I will call for help—"

"Do it if you dare!"

"Take that revolver away from my head!" cried Hamilton, shrilly.

"Yield, then! Yield, or you die!"

Amy was thoroughly frightened. She believed the kidnapper had the will to do murder if he was thwarted, and she saw how much in danger the entrapped man was. Clearly, it was criminal folly for her to remain inactive in such an emergency.

"I will go for help!" she exclaimed, to herself.

She turned quickly and—stood face to face with Tony Pierson!

"Please don't go!" he requested, with an unpleasant laugh.

Frightened anew, she tried to pass him hurriedly, but he caught her by the arm.

"Tarry awhile, my queen!" he murmured, with the same offensive and ominous air.

"Let me go!" she gasped.

"My dear, I couldn't think of it. Your pretty face will give light and love to my life. Often have I seen you in the past, and never without laying my homage and my heart at your feet. I have regretted that I could not visit you, for I wanted your esteemed acquaintance, but you have solved the riddle for me. Instead of my seeking you, you have come to me. For this I am duly grateful, and I shall hang to the prize I have obtained."

Amy trembled before the gaze of the race-track sharp. There was that in the gaze which worried her, and she began to realize fully into what trouble she had come by venturing inside the house.

"You will not be so unjust," she remonstrated. "What harm have I ever done you?"

"None, my queen. It isn't that; oh! no. It is the fact that I have found a pearl beyond price, and I intend to hang to it. And there is more. In yonder room are allies of mine. Whatever their plans are, I am in with them. Now, I find you acting the listener at the door, and it is clear that it will never do to let you go hence and tell a tale that will work against us; so you see there is a double reason why you must remain with us."

He knocked on the door.

"Let me go, I beg of you!"

Amy struggled but in vain. His grasp was by far too strong to be broken by her, and when his peculiar knock had been heard and the door was opened by Dolly it was too late for anything but submission. Amy was pulled into the apartment by her captor, where she became the focus of glances. All, Hamilton, Walton and Dolly, were surprised, and it needed Tony to explain.

"Walt," he began, "you are not so prudent as you might be when you let spies hang around your door."

"Hamilton's girl! Do you mean to say she was in here?"

"I found her listening at the door."

"How long had she been there?"

"I don't know."

"Well, by Jove! we must add her to our list of prisoners!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A MAN OF STEEL NERVES.

THE glances which the inmates of the room leveled at each other were a drama in themselves. Singularly enough, Amy did not gaze at her father but at Dolly, and she found her regard fully returned.

There was nothing in Dolly's looks to recommend her. She was a plump, rather interesting-looking person, naturally, but she had destroyed all the prepossessing effects of what Nature had done for her by bleaching her hair, and she now had that appearance which no woman can dare and keep herself in the ranks of life which women ought to move in.

Flashy Dolly was, but it was all that could be said favorably of her.

Amy did not find it a pleasant picture, and she turned her head away.

"Young woman," spoke Walton, "how did you get in here?"

"That is not material," answered Amy.

"It is very material. Tony, go and see if the outer door has been left open."

The subordinate villain obeyed, and the others waited in silence. Hamilton had nothing to say. He was about as much dismayed at seeing Amy there as his foes could be. He could expect no help from her, and the dread that she had learned too much of his affairs was all powerful.

For her part she did not give him lively sympathy. Recent events had lowered him in her opinion until she felt a shrinking when she gazed at him which could not be removed unless the disappearance of Epsom Griggs was so explained that no blame would attach to him.

Tony soon returned.

"All the doors are closed all right."

"Did you ask the servant?" inquired Walton.

"I did not see him."

"Isn't he in?"

"I didn't look."

"Perhaps it does not matter."

Walton cast a glance over the crowd of persons before him and then meditated for some time. All watched him, feeling that he would spring some important conclusion when he spoke. Finally he aroused.

"Dolly," he said, "pen and ink!"

From the mantel the woman brought the articles named and put them on the table. Then Walton took from his pocket a long, narrow strip of paper and held it up before Hamilton.

"You will sign this," he added.

"What is it?" the money-lender inquired.

"A check for fifty thousand dollars, payable to me!"

"You want me to sign it?"

"Yes."

"I refuse."

"You will sign. You are not placed where you can refuse. This matter goes

just as I say, and it will be folly to resist. I have named my terms to you, and this latest arrival—I refer to your charming daughter—forces us to prompt action. Starvation is a slow process, but I know another. You will sign."

"But if I did you would never be able to collect so large a sum without the bank to which it was presented was assured it was all right."

"That is my lookout. I have not gone into this like a greenhorn, and you need not worry about my being able to do as I wish. All you have to do is to sign."

"I refuse."

Seizing Hamilton by the shoulder Walton led him to the table and forced him into the chair.

"Sign!" he repeated.

"I refuse!" stubbornly replied Abram.

Walton drew a revolver and put it to the prisoner's head.

"Sign!"

"For heaven's sake, spare me!" cried Hamilton, his will weakening before the crook's merciless tone.

Dolly laughed carelessly.

"It will be all right, and we need not worry. Tony, let us sit down and have a drink while Walt toys with the good old gent who killed Epsom Griggs."

There was an alcove to the room, and there, too, was another table with a bottle and several glasses. To these Dolly and Tony gave attention, and they drank and laughed during the scenes which immediately followed. Not a whit cared they whether Hamilton lived or died, but they had confidence enough in Walton to believe he would be able to subdue the prisoner.

Amy had seen the key taken from the hall door, so she knew escape in that direction was out of the question, but she paid attention to the door which led into the connecting room, only to find it locked. Her futile attempt brought a smile from all her foes.

Walton had given his male prisoner a brief respite, to see if fear would not weaken his will. Now he spoke once more:

"Sign!"

"I will not!" responded Abram, huskily.

"Sign!"

"No!"

It was stubborn refusal, but not that of a man without fear. Hamilton was about as much afraid as a man could be, but, with his loved dollars at stake, he was resolved to persist. Walton clapped the revolver against his captive's temple and pressed hard.

"Then you die!" he exclaimed, in a terrible voice.

Abram dropped upon his knees by the table.

"Spare me, spare me!" he wailed.

Amy hastened forward, her face pale and troubled. She believed a great tragedy was to be enacted, and she was weak with the terror of the moment.

"In Heaven's name, do not do this deed!" she implored. "He will not yield, and you will destroy all your own chances if you do him harm."

"I win or die!" cried Walton. "Out of the way, girl; out of the way or you will suffer, too. Old man, for the last time, will you obey me? Remember, you die if you decline! Speak! Will you sign?"

"No."

"Then it is death!"

Walton was furious, and he was on the point of keeping his threat when his revolver hand was abruptly knocked up and he was forced back from his victim.

"Take a rest!" uttered a cool voice at his elbow.

Walton turned as quick as possible—he grew dumfounded with what he saw—a name fell from his lips.

"Nerve Nickol!"

"Just so!" lightly replied the man from Rusty Gulch. "That's who I am, and I'm glad to see you. Hope you reciprocate!"

Mysterious as his arrival was in many respects it was not hard to understand that he had entered from the connecting room. The door had been locked, but the key was on the other side, and he had only to turn it and enter. This he had done so carefully that no one had seen or heard him until he took part in the matter under way there.

Nerve Nickol it was, and Walton grew more startled and angry with each passing instant.

"What devil's business has sent you here?" he gasped.

The lightness all faded out of the sport's face, which became dark and severe.

"I am here to stop your devil's work!" he retorted.

"You interfere at your peril."

"My gay crook!" commanded Nerve Nickol, "drop on your knees by your intended victim and give up your game!"

It was a bold challenge, as a spectator would well understand. Not only were the odds so greatly against the bold man from Rusty Gulch but Walton held his revolver, while Nick was not only unarmed, as far as could be seen, but he was dressed as faultlessly as usual and looked more fit for a lady's parlor than for fighting.

To Amy, however, he looked like a hero and a rescuer of might.

Walton was dumfounded by the order thus presented.

"Well, you have a cast-iron nerve!" he exclaimed.

"Never mind that. Get up, Hamilton!"

"Stop!" cried Walton. "Nickol, if you interfere here it will be to your death. We will not endure it."

"What will you do?"

The crook leaned forward and hissed:

"Kill you!"

"Say, old man, if you were in Rusty Gulch you would be set down as the champion bluffer. Out there men always carry their revolvers and generally have occasion to use them once a day, but not a man—Isaac in the whole cuboodle was ever known to go crowing around as to what he was going to do. He does it, and makes no brag about it. Ketch on? Anyhow, I don't like bluffers."

"Be satisfied that you shall get all you want. Hamilton, you do well to remain on your knees."

"Abram, get up!" repeated Nick.

Hamilton looked distressed. He knew not what it was prudent to do. If he was eager to obey the one order he was afraid to disobey the other. The question was solved for him, however—Nick suddenly reached down and lifted him to his feet.

"You make a better show thus," the sport assured him.

Walton flushed with rage and made a forward movement to seize the prisoner anew, but Nick was tiring of this delay. With a neat stroke he knocked Walton down, and the house shook under the force of the fall.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

PEGGY ENTERS THE GAME.

EXCITING as the conversation had been those who looked on had not anticipated such a crisis as this, and, when Walton went down so heavily, nobody but those most concerned managed fully to remain calm. The crook, albeit he was shaken and hurt, was strong of nerve and quick of wit, and he leaped up still holding his revolver.

"I will kill you!" he gasped. "I will—"

But Nerve Nickol's hand had strayed to the gas fixtures above his head and the room suddenly became dark.

Then he hastened to Amy's side.

"Hasten out of the house by way of the connecting door," he directed, "and I will cover your retreat."

"Tony, Tony!" shouted Walton, "give your help here."

The fact that this desperate man still had his revolver did not please Nick. A good deal of harm may often be done with promiscuous shooting, and this must be avoided. Nick, located Walton by his voice, and then moved to his side. When he felt the presence of the crook he first wrested the weapon away and then tripped Walton neatly.

"Get a move on, Abram!" the rescuer directed. "We don't want to monkey here."

Hamilton seemed a good deal dazed, but he was pushed along by Nick until near the door when there was a collision with men Nick could not name exactly. That it was Tony for one he did not doubt, but it might be somebody else. A firm grasp was fastened on the sport and a desperate struggle followed. It ended in both falling to the floor,

where Nick soon succeeded in releasing himself. The delay, however, had sufficed to make him lose all run of events and he came up minus his usual cool unconcern.

He was tempted to seek to light the gas once more, but he remembered that he had sent Amy on in advance, and he knew this would not do.

She must be seen to first of all.

He found the connecting door and passed out into the hall. There a light had before been burning, but was no longer, and the unpleasant suspicion dawned upon him that the foe had used the delay, brief as it had been, in a most decisive fashion.

He ran down the stairs, seeing no one as he went, and sought the front door. It was locked, and he found no sign of a key.

Not disposed to linger under such circumstances, he hurried to the parlor window, flung it up and stepped out on the balcony. Thus he gained view of the street. In one direction he saw Abram going as if for a wager. Down the opposite way a carriage was receding, but further than this he saw no one but a sleepy-looking policeman who was meandering along his beat.

Where was Amy?

Alarmed, Nick turned back.

He had matches in plenty, and one of these he used to light up the hall. No one was there. He hurried to the next floor and re-entered the room of strife.

Was any one there?

It was taking much risk, but his fears for Amy overcome all prudence, and he relighted the gas there, too. The place was deserted by all save himself, and the wonder of the situation grew. Able-bodied people could not go out of sight by magic, and it was certain the actors in the present case had gone by natural means. What were these means?

Nick knew but little concerning the possible tricks of city life, but he was not disposed to turn to the belief that they had vanished by means of secret doors or passages. Instead, he was very much of the opinion that the safest thing he could do was to interview the sleepy-looking policeman at once.

He hastened out and overtook the blue-coat.

"Officer," he began, "did you see anybody come out of that house a while ago?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"Well, there were several of them."

"Where did they go?"

"One man walked off toward the west—"

"I don't care about him."

"The others went in a coach, and were driven off down the avenue."

"Who were they?"

"Two men and two women."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Is anything wrong? One of the women was a bleached-out thing, but the other was a pretty little maiden with brown hair, and I thought then that the bleached thing ought not to associate with her, and *vice versa*. Poor mates, they!"

"How in thunder did they get that coach so quick?"

"It drove up not a full minute before they came hurrying out, and they undoubtedly knew the driver."

"The devil helps his own."

"Is anything wrong? The brown-haired girl seemed to be faint, and they helped her in, but I did not see that there was anything I need interfere with. If there is trouble I shall be glad to help you, sir."

"Never mind."

Nick walked away, leaving the guardian of the night alone.

"Confound his stupidity!" the sport muttered, "there must have been signs visible to a sensible eye that something was wrong. So Amy was faint? Yes, and while she was in that mood they got her away. Only Hamilton escaped—the one person who might live or die for all I care. Hang it all! where am I to look for them?"

He paused on the street corner. There was no sign of the coach, and Nick realized he was thrown completely off the track.

"Where am I to look for them?" he muttered, again.

The next morning Peggy Benner finished her household work and saw Dick go away.

This left her alone and she was not sorry. There was never a time when there was much good will wasted between her and her father, and there was less now than previously. True, Dick had stood by his daughter when Walton wanted her put where she could not betray their secrets, but this did not tend to much affection.

Dick's object had been to keep his young housekeeper, and Peggy knew it.

So, now, Dick was surly and suspicious, and he watched her in a way which roused her ill will. She was not in favor with any of the Fancy Five gang, and she cared nothing for the fact, otherwise.

Having completed her work, this morning, she went to her own room and began to put a few touches on her toilet. Peggy had not been born in a good circle of life, and she had never risen above the old level, but she had all of the pride of her sex in her appearance, and she wished to "smarten" herself, now.

She held up an old hat she possessed and looked at it critically.

"Looks as if it had been run over by a hoss-car!" she muttered, disconsolately. "Why can't I be like Sadie Smith, an' have a new Yeaster bunnit every year? Say, I will, next year! I'm goin' ter break away from Dick Benner an' earn my livin' alone. Then I'll have so much finery I'll jest make Sadie green with envy, sure pop!"

It was a picture which made the girl chuckle, and there was not much improbability about it, either.

Peggy had her share of good looks, and decent clothes would work a remarkable transformation in her.

"Now," she resumed, "this hat is jest a holy terror—Hullo! what was that?"

She paused and listened.

"Somebody cryin' in the next house. Sorry fer her, but she ought ter brace up an' not do et, by jinks!"

Having no fine sense of honor, and possessing considerable curiosity, Peggy applied her ear to the wall and listened attentively.

"There's a man in there, an' he's makin' hisself disagreeable," she added, presently. "Men always do make themselves disagreeable; they're built that way. Oh! dear, I don't see why they ever was born; they ain't no good. Only Plum Gilder; he's all right."

Woman-like, Peggy saw only perfection in the "man" of her own choice.

"Hear that shark talk mean!" continued Peggy, disgusted. "Hullo!"

Her eyes grew bigger, and then she abruptly exclaimed:

"Say, I do believe that's Eg Walton!"

Peggy was surprised, and she was more. She had grown to hate all of the Fancy Five gang strongly, and only needed to see the chance and she would seize it to baffle any plan they might have.

"Now, I do believe Eg has some gal shut up there!" resumed Peggy, after more listening. "How kin I find out?"

As the other persons were in the next house, difficulties were presented which would have discouraged most persons at the start, but it would be but a trifling exaggeration to say that no difficulty could discourage Peggy.

"Ef Walton has got somebody shut up I am goin' ter know et, ef it takes my nose off ter do et!"

Having arrived at this ominous conclusion she considered the means of accomplishing her object. The people who lived next door were new-comers in the neighborhood, and what little she knew of them was not to their credit. It would never do to confide in them, and whatever plan was adopted must be a bold one.

"I have et!" was the decision. "I'll go up ter the roof an' see ef I kin go down the skylight!"

Risky the plan was. What would come of it?

CHAPTER XXIX.

PEGGY AND THE PRISONER.

WHEN her decision was once arrived at Peggy was not long in trying to put it into effect. It was easy to reach the roof of the house in which she lived, and to that point she made her way. The roof was flat, and she stood and looked around curiously.

"Ef I could see Plum I would call him," she thought. "Mebbe this is more a boy's work than a girl's—psshaw! what a boy kin do I kin!"

So self-reliant Peggy made her way to the scuttle of the next house. The all-important question now became, would she be able to move the scuttle? If it was fastened on the inner side her hopes would fade away, and she thought the chances were against her, anyhow.

"Now fer the try!"

She laid hold of the scuttle and lifted. At first it seemed to be a failure, for her grasp could not be made of the best, but she persevered, and success came.

Up rose the scuttle.

"Jee-whiz! this is great!"

Certainly, the way was open, and the ladder left all the means desired for her to enter the house. She went down with slow and cautious step, often pausing, for she did not know but some one might be at the top of the building.

Evidently, that floor was clear, for she saw nobody, and nothing was to be heard.

"I s'pose this is larceny an' embezzlin' in the first degree," Peggy murmured, "but ef I bring up in Sing Sing I shall hev lots o' experience, an' Sadie Smith can't brag over me no more."

Strengthened by this thought she went on down the house. She found it constructed just like that in which she lived, so she knew where to go, and she was not long in locating the room where she believed the prisoner was!

With no one to meddle she listened at the door but could hear nothing within. She tried the door softly, but it was locked. She was tempted to call, but the danger that some enemy of the prisoner might be within showed her how foolish that would be.

There was a better way, fortunately.

Investigation showed that, as in her own house, there was an adjoining room which had a transom over the door, and to this she made her way. The adjoining room was not fully finished off, and it was filled with old trash which had been gathering for years, it seemed.

Among the rest was a table, and she dragged this to the door and placed it so she could look over the transom. A turn of the latter was all that was necessary, and the view was hers.

"There she is!"

Big grew Peggy's eyes.

"Whew! ain't she pretty!"

Eagerly Peggy feasted her eyes, and she soon decided she had her reward for taking the risk. There was a young lady in the room, and her sad air told its own story. When Peggy had satisfied her curiosity as far as eyesight would do it she spoke:

"Hullo!"

The young lady started and looked around.

"Right up here!" added Peggy.

The young lady obeyed. She saw the transom, and, above it, a small, bright face. To her it looked like that of a mere child, and she did not see so very much in it. Hope had come to her, at first, but it vanished.

"Got yer peepers on me?" asked the small person.

"Yes," and the young lady smiled faintly.

"I'm Peggy."

"Are you?"

"Bet yer life. Do you live here?"

"I am here now."

"Thought I noticed ye," gravely agreed Peggy.

"I suppose you live here."

"I live in the sewer."

"Where?"

"In the sewer."

"I see you are a joker."

"Be I? Wal, mebbe, though I hadn't found et out, myself. We never joke in the sewer—et's ag'inst perfess'nal ettyquet."

"So you are a singular girl."

"I ain't a double one."

Peggy was not so indifferent to business as she seemed. While she talked she had been using her eyes. She wanted to be sure she was right before she made any decided move. If she was wrong she might get into trouble. Now, however, she had come to the conclusion she had summed up the situation correctly at the start.

"You're shut up, ain't ye?" she suddenly added.

"I am, indeed."

"Who did et?"

"A man named Walton."

"I thought et was that pestiferous mean skunk."

By this time the prisoner was beginning to see that the small face was an older one than she had at first thought, and she eagerly asked:

"Do you know him?"

"Know him? Know Eg Walton? Wal, I guess a rat knows a cat."

"He isn't your friend?"

"Ef he was I would go an' jump inter the North River an' never be seen ag'in until next grass."

The prisoner had risen. She now approached the transom, hope appearing in her face for the first time.

"Oh! will you not get word to my friends that I am shut up—"

"Who be your friends?"

"I should want the word to go to Mr. Norman Nickol, Hotel —"

"Who?"

"Norman—"

"Nickol? Great jew's-harps! you do not know him?"

"Yes, do you?"

"Wal, I should smile!" declared Peggy. "He's the feller I should be in love with ef I hadn't seen a pootier gent in Mr. Plum Gilder. Nick is a whole team, but Plum is a corker, you bet!"

"Peggy, if you will get word to Mr. Nickol I will reward you handsomely, and —"

"I ain't out fer the boodle, but all I kin do fer a friend o' Nick's shall be done, you bet. Tell me all about your difficulty, an' you shall have help ef I go fer the mayor an' hev him order out the Twenty-second Regiment ter defend ye."

"My name is Amy Hamilton, and I am held prisoner here by Walton and his men. This is no time to go into long stories, nor is it necessary. All you have to do is to go to Mr. Nickol and tell him how I am situated and he will do the rest."

"I see; I jest press the button an' he does the rest. Amy, you shall be got out of here an' live ter be a comfort an' a delight ter Nick. Don't mind what I said about bein' in love with him, fer I like Plum better, an' there ain't really no reason why you should be jealous. Me an' Nick ain't never had no talk on love subjicks, but me an' Plum hev. Now, I'm off, an' you kin depend on me ter give ye a helpin' hand right soon. Be ez chipper ez you kin, fer it'll all come out right. So-long until I see ye ag'in!"

Having rattled off this speech Peggy disappeared, and Amy heard her get down from the table. After that all was still, and time passed on as before, but not with her in the same mood.

The bright star of hope was now before her.

Amy had been inclined to despair since her incarceration, for Tony had been much with her, and he had forced his lover-like views upon her until she knew not what would come next. The success of the gang in abducting her had seemed to indicate that fate was especially with them, and she feared no word could be got to her friends.

The one window of her prison was boarded up so she could give no alarm, herself, and the gaslight was all she had to look at. Dreary it was, but, though girls like Peggy were new in her experience, she was greatly encouraged by the incident.

With what patience she could summon she waited for the next event, and it came much sooner than was to be hoped for. Again she heard sounds at the transom; again she saw Peggy's face there.

"What success?" was Amy's quick question.

"All right; I've brought Plum."

"But I told you to send word to Mr. Nickol."

A new face appeared beside Peggy's; one which had the same peculiar sharpness, but a larger face.

"Madam," quoth this person, "I am P. Gilder, Esquire, an' I'm all blazes on the rescue act. I'll hev you out in a twinklin', but how?"

"You should have obtained a policeman."

"Not fer Hannah! Them chaps are all right ter look at, with their pooty clothes on, but what do they amount ter in real life? Now, don't interrupt until I see how I kin get you out on our side."

Plum studied the situation. He did not want to break in the door for several reasons, one of which was that he knew it would make altogether too much noise, and some other way must be found.

His gaze wandered through the room where he was, himself, and then his eyes suddenly brightened. He had seen an ax, and this he secured without delay. Introducing the edge into the crack between door and casing he pried with a strong and steady hand.

"We'll bu'st this dungeon or bring in the fire-brigade!" he declared.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE WRITING ON THE WALL.

AMY waited with her heart beating with heavy throbs. Would the plan succeed? Peggy had explained it over the transom, but there was so much of doubt that the prisoner did not yet feel that degree of confidence she would have felt with workers of more mature years on the opposite side of the transom.

She did not know Plum Gilder.

He was not satisfied with the first efforts he made, but he persevered diligently and soon found he was making progress. Little by little he felt the lock give, and then, at last, there was a sudden crack and he saw the door fly back.

"He we are!" he announced. "Walk right out!"

"Oh! I am so grateful!" cried Amy.

"So be it, but I won't brag about et until I see the sky above the roof o' this palace. Come on—don't lose one blessed minute, fer in the midst o' success we are sometimes in defeat. Come on, an' we'll go star-gazin'."

Amy was at the door, and her rescuers gave her no time to talk. She was hurried into the hall, and then toward the ladder.

"Is there no way to the street?" she asked.

"There is, an' it leads ter danger, too. Skip et, miss, an' jest go where we lead."

She obeyed, and though she did not feel sure of the wisdom of the plan, they were soon on the roof.

Once there Plum explained the rest, which was for them to go to the Benner house and thence to the street.

"Unless some o' Walton's gang come in prematurely," he added, "this will work like fun. The coast was all clear when we come in, an' I hope it will stay so. Say, I see Peggy on this roof afore she come fer me, an' I was on the watch so she got me easy when she wanted me, but I didn't think et was sech an important matter as this. Now fer our escape, ladies an' feller citizens."

In a few minutes they were inside the Benner house, and proceeding cautiously toward the lower floor.

There was not much danger of Dick being around, and their prospects seemed good, but they were not to go out as they wished. Peggy pushed the door of the living room open and then all had a severe shock.

There sat Walton and Tony, taking life easy and appearing to be at peace with the whole world—but what a change came over them when they saw the fugitives.

"Thunder!" gasped Tony.

"The girl!" exclaimed Walton.

"Send!"

The last word was from Plum, and he gave Amy a push to emphasize his command, but she was not soon enough. Past troubles had put the plotters fully on their guard, and they now recovered their wits quickly. With a rush they moved toward the fugitives, and the latter had no means of escape.

"Keep off!" cried Plum, and he struck out at Tony so stoutly that he knocked that person against the wall with a thud, but more than this was needed.

Tony was but temporarily put out of

the contest, and he hastened to the relief of his friend.

Walton had seized Amy, and though Plum and Peggy were raining blows upon him he held fast. With the addition of Tony's strength the chances of the weaker party ceased, though Plum fought to the end.

"Lemme alone, ye mean lumps o' sin!" he panted. "Think you kin run this outfit, do ye? Wal, b'jinks! you're 'way on in yer reckonin', an' don't ye forget it. Why, I'll climb all over ye—"

And so he would have done, figuratively, if not literally, if he had been a little stronger. But Plum, with all his courage, was but a boy, and he found himself opposed by more than he could manage. His blows hurt, though, and Walton grew angry.

"Knock that kid insensible, Tony!" ordered the leader of the Fancy Five. "We have had enough of his meddling."

Tony turned upon Plum and seized him by the throat.

"So you want a share of this trouble, do you?" he cried. "Well, you can have it. I'll shut off your wind in short order, my young puppy. See?"

Tight was the grasp on Plum's neck, and there was no knowing what might have happened, but there was a sudden diversion.

Thud!

It was the sound of a heavy blow, and Tony reeled and fell to the floor. Plum, thus released, rallied and tried to get his eyes clear. Indistinctly he saw some one hammering away at Walton, and it dawned upon him that there was rescue with a vengeance.

"Whoop!" he shouted, "I guess we are in it!"

They were "in it" largely, for the newcomer seemed to be a perfect human cyclone. He struck out with terrible force and perfect accuracy, and when he was done both Walton and Tony lay insensible. Plum had lived where scenes of fighting were common occurrences, but the way in which all this had been done amazed even him.

"Wal, I'll be jiggered!" he muttered, blankly.

He gazed wonderingly at the man who had been the active agent. He was a tall, slender man—or so he seemed to be, though something of this effect might be due to the long coat he wore; a coat which made him look much like a minister, though Plum thought there was something familiar about him, and the boy knew of no minister of his acquaintance who looked just like him.

The rescuer turned to Amy.

"Come!" he directed.

He motioned toward the door, and he did not need to urge anyone who was there. In a short time he, Amy, Peggy and Plum were on the street. Then he looked at Peggy.

"This girl must not go back," he said, decisively.

"Correct, an' she goes ter my home," replied Plum.

"Can you shield her properly?"

"Yes, sirree."

"So be it, then."

"Miss Hamilton, I will call a cab and see that you go to your own residence, at once, but you will please excuse me for a moment. I must have dropped something in the room above, and I will return there for a moment."

Without waiting for a reply he hastened up the stairs.

"He did drop something," quoth Plum, "an' et was about three hundred an' fifty pounds o' human flesh."

The rescuer was soon back, looking as calm as man could. A cab happened to be close at hand, and this he engaged. He started Plum and Peggy off, and then he entered the vehicle with Amy and they were driven away.

"Peggy, w'ot do ye think o' this?"

"Plum, wait until I git my breath. Things hev gone so like a whirlwind I am all flustered."

"That feller is a corker, an' et strikes me I've seen him before— Say, b'jinks!"

"What?"

"I'll be chawed up ef I don't think he's the feller who give the name o' Griffin, on a former occasion, though he has changed his looks most amazin'. Yes, that's it, by

hokey!—Griffin et was! Wal, now, what kind of a chap is he, anyhow?" and Plum looked thoroughly bewildered.

In the mean while Walton and Tony had recovered their senses. They regained consciousness at about the same time, and then sat up and stared at each other blankly. They had aching heads as the result of their encounter with the fighting unknown, but this did not prevent them from being as clear-headed as usual.

"Are you alive?" groaned Tony.

"What sort of a demon was that?" wondered Walton, with a responsive groan.

"He hits like the kick of a mule!"

Walton hurriedly rose.

"Tony," he exclaimed, "this is serious business for us, and we shall have to—"

He stopped short.

"Have to what?" asked Tony.

"Look!"

Walton gasped the word, but his pointing finger told the rest. Tony looked in the direction indicated, and on the wall, traced in big, bold letters with some dark substance, he saw these words:

"COMPLIMENTS OF CHARON, DETECTIVE!"

Blankly the race-track sharp gazed, but Walton recovered quickly.

"We have run up against this unknown foe who is hunting us—this fiend who works in the dark and leaves never a sign of his deeds except the deeds themselves. The *Invisible Detective* is still on our track." ¶

"What will he do next?" gasped Tony.

"Perhaps he will arrest us—"

"Not unless he is mighty spry about it. This thing has gone far enough, and it is going to be stopped. I'm going to skip New York."

"It is the only safe way. The fiend takes a system new in detective work, but he is more dangerous than any one else, for he is never seen as others are."

"We must skip."

"So we must," Walton agreed, "but not until we have made our last attempt to save something from the wreck. I am going to see Hamilton once more ere we surrender all."

CHAPTER XXXI.

STRIPPED OF HIS GLORY.

On the following day the card of Norman Nickol was brought to Amy at her home.

Since her return there had been much of interest in her life. Her rescuer had failed to give any light as to his identity, avoiding all information which would show her who he was, where he lived, or whether she would ever see him again.

Abram Hamilton had shown but little interest when she returned, and, beyond a few words with her at the time she came back, he had made himself nearly invisible to her. She had made an effort to talk with him about the matter which had taken them to the house Walton had arranged as a trap, but he had left the room at once, and given her no opportunity to renew the subject.

The money-lender was far from being himself, mentally, and his singular conduct could not but lead Amy to wonder if trouble had affected his mind.

Amy, herself, seemed to have more trouble than she could bear with fortitude, and it was a great relief when the card of the man from Rusty Gulch was brought to her.

Not yet had she seen him since her adventure, and she was anxious to tell him of it, yet reluctant to do so since she must reveal some part of her father's affairs which could not be pleasant.

Events proved, however, that Nick had something to say which soon overshadowed all else.

Greetings over, she remarked:

"I have not seen you lately."

"I have been out of town."

"Indeed!"

"Yes," he added, "and I am thinking of going again. I may conclude to leave permanently."

It was a shock to Amy. From the first she had seen that Nick was not in his usual spirits—indeed, he looked grave and unhappy, and it would have impressed her even more strongly had it not been for her

own troubles. Now, his somber air was striking in the extreme.

"Going away?" she faltered.

"Miss Amy, it all depends on you!" declared Nick, with a sudden return of force.

"How so?"

"I want to ask you a question. I know what your answer will be in advance, but I ask you not to be too radical in your views. Consider my situation before you decide wholly."

"This is very ominous. Will you please explain?"

"The question is this: If you found that I was a confounded villain, would it be any excuse for me if there were extenuating circumstances?"

Amy was worried. Of course she could not answer the question in any but a affirmative way, if brought to answer it, but she was too much startled to do so. Was her idol to fall?

"I—I don't understand," she faltered.

"Miss Amy, I am a liar!" declared Nick, with emphasis.

"In what way?"

"About myself, and about Rusty Gulch. When I came here I gave you a picture of that mining-town which would have delighted the soul of an artist. I represented it as a place where there was a beautiful valley, grand mountains and magnificent verdure; where flowers ran riot and nature was seen in her loveliest mood. All this was false!"

Nick paused for breath and went on mournfully:

"I gave you names for the peaks, streams, and so on, that I said were there. Every name I gave you was false, and only the creation of my mind at the moment I spoke. These names you remember, but I do not."

Poor Amy could say nothing. If he could demolish mountains and rivers so easily, what would come next?

"Let me say frankly what Rusty Gulch is. The name is suggestive when one thinks of it carefully, and it is not misapplied. A more desolate place it would be hard to find. The valley is one unbroken stretch of sand which glows under the sun like a furnace; the little streams are muddy brooks where one would not willingly tread because of the mud; the mountains are low, small hills upon which hardly a tree, or blade of grass ever grows, and where the eye sees only barren rocks! That is the true Rusty Gulch."

Still Amy was speechless.

"As for the churches, banks, and the like, there are none. As for my boasted possessions there, when I was in Rusty Gulch I worked as a common miner, never got a dollar ahead, and own positively nothing there. If I did I could not swap it for a mule!"

Bitterly Nick spoke. He thought himself the biggest villain outside of Rusty Gulch, and kept back nothing.

Amy was still too much surprised to talk with due attention to the subject, and it was purely involuntary, in one sense of the word, when she asked:

"Why have you said all this in the past?"

"Because I was a villain!"

"But I don't see your object."

"I don't, now. There was no good reason why I should clothe Rusty Gulch in glories it never wore in reality, but I came here to play a part, and in a mood of recklessness I carried things to an extreme. It did me no good, except that it pleased the wayward part of my nature, to lie so outrageously about Rusty Gulch. I did it, though, and made the miserable desert out a garden of Eden."

"Still, I am mystified."

"You heard me say I was a beggar, didn't you?"

"Poverty is not a crime."

"Some other things are. I have lied to you."

"Not with any evil intention, I am sure."

"In this you are right. If I was a liar it was not to do you harm; I thank Heaven I can say this. But do you see how different I am from what you thought me?"

"Yes."

"Then you must hate me."

"I do not know your motives."

"Unluckily, I cannot explain in full, but have I not said enough? Do not my lies brand me all that is evil?"

"You use strong terms."

"Are they any too strong?"

"I repeat that I do not know your object."

"Amy, if, in the near future, I could convince you that I am not so contemptible as I seem; if I can prove that my motives were good at the start, and that I am not wholly a knave, could you forgive the lies I have told?"

"I certainly do not see any reason why I could not. As for the falsehoods, they—"

"Lies! Call them *lies*! We only prune the talk of the time when we are insincere. I have told no falsehoods; they are plain, diabolical *lies*!"

"You say you told them in a spirit of recklessness—"

"Yes, but they were told to *you*!"

"If told at all, I am glad it was to me. I can forgive all that you can justly ask me to forgive."

"Amy," cried the sport, "you are an angel!"

"I hope," replied Amy, with a momentary return of lightness, "this is not one of your—*your lies*?"

Her archness did not give sunlight to Nick's mind, though he understood her mood.

"Who could lie, or exaggerate, when telling of your charms? An angel you are, and the best of the class. But you may misjudge me in this, since I have branded myself in so much. Let me be silent until I can prove the temptations which were around me when I fell from the lines of truth. Amy, can you wait a little while for the full explanation of all this?"

"Do you assure me it is right that I should wait?" she asked, seriously.

"I do."

"You must realize that when you have confessed so much it is asking a good deal of me to trust blindly in you."

"Don't trust in me. Simply wait a little before you decide to condemn me. Suspend judgment. Give me a chance! The situation is singular, and I am not rash enough to declare that you will do well to refrain a moment from condemning me wholly, but I wish—I do wish you would suspend judgment."

"I will, and I hope you will not make me sorry for it."

"You are an angel—"

"You may tell me that when you have proven your right to do so."

The rebuff checked Nick's ardor. It was given with the kindest manner possible, but it was a suggestion that she was not weak enough to forgive, or believe in him fully, until he had cleared his name. He was silent for a time, and then he added:

"You are right, and I want to say that your caution is only justice, prudence and good judgment. I respect you all the more because you do not blindly trust one who has so willfully lied—"

"Let us change the word to 'falsehood,'" suggested Amy, with a smile.

"If you ever forgive me fully we will call it that; until then, let it stand as plain 'lie'!"

Conversation had passed to a lighter mood, and the remainder of the interview was more pleasant to both, though it was clear there could never be a renewal of the old relations without a full and satisfactory explanation. Amy hoped this would come, but Nick's opinion was expressed in his self-inquiry when he left:

"Shall we ever speak together in friendship, again? Will she utterly condemn me when she knows what I really am?"

Arriving at his hotel he threw himself into a chair and fell into moody thought. Of late he had not been the companionable sport of old. He had refused all invitations to play cards, and with an air as if it would contaminate him, some of the disappointed parties thought.

Nick was in another state of evolution.

For some time, on this occasion, he sat there, and then a slight sound in the next room attracted his attention. He had been in the habit of seeing Joseph Jones put in an appearance whenever he entered his apartments and, without making himself obnoxious by inquiry, give his master chance to call on him for his services. As this had not happened now it suggested the possibility that some intruder might be in the

other room, though Nick had come in so lightly that Joseph might have been there and not heard him.

It was best to be sure.

He entered the other room.

When he unclosed the door he thought he heard somebody move quickly, but when he passed fully in he found Joseph brushing a coat at the further side of the place.

Nick's gaze wandered, and he saw something of interest at once. Crossing the room he found a drawer of the desk open and the papers therein a good deal disarranged.

"Joseph," he exclaimed, sharply, "is this your work?"

"Beg pardon, sir?" the valet softly answered.

"Who has been meddling with my papers?"

"Nobody, sir, as far as I know."

"Did you unlock this drawer?"

"No, sir?"

"Carefully, Joseph!"

"I think, sir, you must have left the drawer open, for it was so when I noticed it, and I do not think the chambermaid would meddle with it, sir—"

"Nor do I. Now, look here, Joe; this won't do. I always leave this drawer locked when I go out. There is one chance in a thousand that I forgot it to-day, though I do not think such was the case. I believe you found a key that would open it, and that you have been monkeying with my papers!"

"Indeed, sir, you do me wrong," declared Joseph, meekly but earnestly. "I would not meddle—"

"Joe, you want to look a little out. You were found in Hamilton's house under conditions which leave no doubt in my mind that you were there as a burglar. I overlooked it with the hope that you would reform, but this does not look like it."

"Mr. Nickol, I assure you—"

"I don't doubt it, Joe. You would assure me that the moon was made of green cheese and expect me to believe it, but my faith in you is just about dead busted. You're too mysterious for my appetite."

Nick closed the drawer with a bang, locked it and walked out of the room without more talk.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ABRAM DEVELOPS PECULIARITIES.

AMY was engaged in some species of fancy work when Mr. Hamilton came into the room. She did not notice who had thus appeared, and she continued her labor without looking up. If she had looked she would have seen him stand still and regard her with singular intentness for some time.

Finally he advanced close to her.

"Busy as usual, I see," he observed.

"Yes."

"Going to wear that, yourself?"

"It is intended for sale at a fair to benefit needy children."

"Humph!"

"Don't you approve of it?"

"Amy," replied Hamilton, with some emphasis, "your idea is all right, but I do not approve of it. I object to your doing so much hard work, you see."

The girl looked up in surprise. It was something new for him to talk in that way. All her life he had encouraged her to work, and he had never seemed so happy as when she did so. He had taken especial pains to make it known that they were too poor—so he called it—for her to be idle, and she had always understood that she must help attend to the household duties, and thus save expense in the way of having more help, whether she liked the notion or not.

All this she had done willingly, for she was of an industrious nature, but, now, he had taken a new tack.

Remembering his own words of the past she now quietly replied:

"You know we are poor."

"Oh! no; far from it."

"Do you so think?"

"Yes. We are well blessed with this world's goods."

"It is pleasant to feel so," admitted Amy, puzzled more than ever.

"I have a proposition to make."

"I shall be pleased to hear it."

"When are you and Nickol going to marry?"

Amy blushed.

"When are we— You are joking."

"Now, see here, Amy, let us look at this frankly. Not counting what has, or has not, been said between us, I am well-aware of how all this is going. I have noticed you and Nickol particularly, and drawn my own conclusions. Don't dispute me, now, for if I am wrong there is no harm done. Imagine it is just as I say, and let it go at that. Now when are you going to marry?"

"I am not aware that we shall at all."

Amy had decided to obey his wishes and make no talk about it, so she tried to be matter-of-fact.

"Then it will not occur at present?"

"No."

"Not within some months?"

"No."

"Then I have a suggestion to make to you. I can see you are all tired out, and that you need relaxation. There is but one way to get actual, thorough rest, and that is to take a trip to Europe."

If Amy had been surprised before she was more so now. She ceased work wholly and gazed at Hamilton in speechless wonder.

"What do you think of it?" he added, after a pause.

"Are you going?"

"No, but you can go alone."

"Go to Europe?"

"Yes."

"Do you really mean all you say?"

"Most certainly; I am not a trifling man. You can go, and it will do you a good deal of good. You can see London, Paris, Switzerland, Rome and all the rest, and you don't know how you will enjoy it. It is a great thing to go to Europe, and you will find it so. When can you start?"

"Not at all! I have no desire to go on such a trip, and if I had, I feel I should be glad to back out at the last moment. My tastes do not run in that direction, and America is good enough for me to live in. I am much obliged for your suggestion, but I will decline with thanks."

"Nonsense! Take the chance."

"Do you want to get rid of me?"

"Do I? Oh! no, no; certainly not. What put that into your head? I should be glad to go along with you, but you see the business has to be looked after. You can go, and have all the money you want, though. When can you start?"

It was not a joke; Amy saw that plainly, for she had never seen him more in earnest. It was very odd, but as she was determined not to agree to the proposition, anyhow, she did not see that she need speculate deeply over it.

Quietly she persisted in her decision, and he gave it up at last.

"Well, if you decide thus you will have to do the household work, yourself," he said, presently, irritably.

"What do you mean?"

"I am not going to have any servant in this place after next week. They are not worth the salt they eat, and I'm going to keep clear of them after this. I'll give the notice in the morning, and not a soul of the brood stays here from now on."

"Why is this?" Amy asked, wonderingly.

"Expenses must be cut down."

"But you can afford to let me go to Europe."

"Different matter!" sharply commented Abram.

"You puzzle me, father."

"Puzzle you? Nothing of the sort; nothing of the sort! It's all very clear. I will see you in the morning, and if you see fit to accept my first proposition you can do so. If not, then we will dispense with hired help and be free from the whole brood!"

Hamilton rose and marched out of the room, leaving Amy staring after him in unabated surprise. All he had said surprised her, and she did not know what to make of it. If he had his peculiarities they had never been pronounced in the past, and all had been easy to understand, since they hinged uniformly on his love of gold, but this new departure was unique and past comprehension.

Abram had not finished with his new freaks, for he at once put on his hat, left the house and went to the hotel where Nerve Nickol was residing. The sport was in, and he received the caller with due urbanity.

Somewhat keenly he studied the money-lender's face, but there was nothing there to attract attention.

"This is an unexpected honor," he observed.

"I've come on business," explained Abram, abruptly.

"Indeed!"

"Yes."

"I am at your service."

"Would you like to go into a paying business?"

"Certainly."

"Some little capital is required, but not so very much—not so very much. Of course you can raise a good sum from your property at Rusty Gulch?"

Nickol winced. He had, of course, not told Hamilton that the glories of Rusty Gulch were illusions, but it worried him to hear them referred to at all.

"It is worth as much as ever," he diplomatically answered.

"Are you anxious to return there?"

"Not especially."

"Of course it is a fine place; I can realize that from your description of it, and you must be a man of no mean power, with all your great wealth, but what is New York? It's the queen city of the world; the fairest spot the sun shines upon; the masterpiece of man's handiwork and Providence's gracious favor. Am I not right?"

Nick was not a little surprised to hear his companion drop into such a poetic form of expression, but he replied quietly:

"You are right."

"Then you will listen to a proposition?"

"Certainly."

"It is this: I think my house-lot may be put to better use than it now has for us. What is a house, anyhow? Merely a place where one sleeps, and which is a constant out-go of money. Why not put the lot to more paying purposes? Why not start in business there?"

"What sort of business?"

Abram's face had been composed up to this time, but he now leaned forward, and his expression conveyed the same eagerness seen in his manner as he distinctly replied:

"A beer garden!"

"Huh?"

Nerve Nickol had given a start, and his involuntary question was one of deep surprise.

"A beer garden!" repeated Abram, decidedly.

"You must be joking."

"I am not."

"Would you enter such an ignoble business?"

"Why not?"

"Well, even if your own conscience did not reproach you, you know that you have a daughter. What would Amy say to this?"

"Nothing!"

"Do you mean that she would consent?"

"She will not be asked. What does a woman know about business, and why should she interfere? I tell you we men are too much under the foot of woman. We are like slaves driven to the market, to be disposed of as our masters—the women—see fit. It is time that men in this land put their foot down and throw off the shackles, sir! Amy! Bah! is she to dictate my business policy?"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE TRAIL OF CRIME.

NERVE NICKOL looked hard at the speaker. Abram's words were not those of a man of sense, and they might have brought forth a reproof had not Nick's eyes told him more than his ears. He noticed a peculiar wildness in Hamilton's own eyes, and it was not hard to understand that something was wrong.

"I reckon Abram has been taking too much bug-juice," thought the sport, with the free and easy judgment of the West.

Keeping his sentiments quiet he inquired, aloud:

"So you would start a beer garden, would you?"

"Yes, and fill up my cellar with earth."

The last remark seemed wholly irrelevant.

"Fill up your cellar?" repeated Nick.

"Yes; make the whole thing level with the ground."

"Would you not need the cellar as a storage reservoir for surplus beer, sir?"

"Oh! no; not by any means. Wholly unnecessary."

"What do you gain by filling the cellar?"

"It's not needed," replied Abram, irritably. "If I wish to fill up the cellar, whose business is it?"

"Only your own."

"That's right; that's right!"

Hamilton looked relieved, and the wild expression disappeared from his eyes. He went on more naturally:

"Are you with me in this?"

"Well, really, Mr. Hamilton—"

"Think of the profit. Glass of beer, five cents; and if the bartenders are shrewd they can draw it about all froth. Maybe I shall do that part, myself. Yes, yes; now I think of it I will. Ha! I'll see there is plenty of froth! No money shall be wasted in my establishment, now I do assure you. Froth, froth! That's where the profit comes in!"

Silently Nick surveyed the speaker. Despite the nature of the latest comments he abandoned his theory that Abram had imbibed too much drink, himself, and found another.

"I'll be hanged if the old fellow's mind don't seem to be wandering!" he decided.

"Now, Mr. Nickol, I'll give you time to think of this, but don't decide in the negative until you see me again. I tell you the plan is great. Have a lovely beer garden, and get rich at a bound. Ha! old boy, how is that?"

The money-lender, who had seldom been known to jest, poked Nick in the ribs and chuckled merrily.

Yet, there was no merriment in what he said, except to himself.

"Quite a scheme," agreed the sport.

"And there will be many feet of earth over the cellar, eh?"

"Well, there surely will if you fill it up."

"I shall."

Nick looked at the old man in silence for awhile, and then quietly observed:

"You shall have your answer in due time. Just now I do not feel like going into it fully. Somehow, I am not sleeping as I ought, lately. Don't you think a man ought to get a good deal of sleep?"

"Yes."

"I'll wager I can stay in bed longer, to-night, than you can. Is it a go?"

"How much is the wager?" demanded Abram, with brightening eyes.

"Five dollars."

"Ha! give me time to start fair—let me get home before you retire—and I will put in all the time from now to morning."

"Good! We will both do that. But I shall have to rise at six."

"I can lie until eight!" cried Abram, with a laugh.

"Then you will beat me out. Well, come to me to-morrow and assure me that you have been in bed from eight, to-night, until the same hour to-morrow, and the wager is yours. You'll earn the five."

"I'll do it!"

Hastily the miser rose, his mind now all on the earning of the sum named, and Nick had accomplished his object. Believing that Hamilton had deprived himself of needed sleep he thought to make matters right by getting him to sleep soundly once more.

Forgetting all about his schemes, Abram went home and retired as agreed upon, but his mind soon wandered from the subject. After tossing for awhile on the bed he arose and for a long time sat around in moody silence, except that, now and then, muttered words passed his lips.

Hours passed as he sat there, and, in due time, every one else in the house retired. Finally he arose from his chair, opened his door and listened attentively.

Nothing was to be heard, and the whole place seemed dark.

Retreating, he lighted a lamp and left the room. Down to the basement he went, and further down. When he paused he was in the cellar. Once there his manner changed. He was no longer so eager to prosecute the object he had in his mind, and his steps grew slow and hesitating.

"What if I should meet his ghost?" he muttered.

Holding the lamp well up he surveyed the visible area with uneasy gaze. He saw

no "ghost," and nothing to do him harm. Then he went on to the little inclosure. The lamp gave out its light with fitful glimmers, but it showed no more than he was accustomed to see there.

At a certain spot, however, he gazed with keen attention.

"*He is under there!*" the money-lender muttered. "Dare I make sure he has not gone?"

Abram rubbed his forehead with slow and weary motions. He did not look like himself, then, and he was so ill at ease that the lamp trembled in his grasp.

"I did it for the best," he muttered, presently. "You were too hard with me, Epsom. You should have known I could not give up the money, after having it so many years. You were unjust, and, when I did it, I thought it was no more than what I ought to do."

He listened intently.

"It was murder? No, Epsom, it was not. I only removed you, and there was nothing but good will in it. It is the law of Nature that some shall fall by the way. You fell; that was all."

Again he appeared to listen.

"You want me to look up your heirs? Oh! no, Epsom, I could not think of doing that. I have the money, and I will see that it is well taken care of, too."

Again the listening attitude.

"No, no, Epsom," he resumed, "I can't think of having your body removed. I only hope it will lie where it is until I do remove it, which will be long hence. Epsom, it makes no difference where you lie, nor how deeply you are buried; so, in order to avoid discovery, I am going to have the cellar filled up. This I will do, and then I will start business above the filling-in, and thus you will not be found in the place where I have put you."

Abram stopped, and then irritably added: "No more, Epsom; I will not listen to you!"

He turned away with an air of decision and began to walk the limits of the cellar with slow and thoughtful steps. His head was bent, and on his face was a peculiar expression.

Evidently, he was ill at ease.

"Will this thing ever grow quiet?" he muttered. "Do I fancy it, or does every one gaze at me with suspicion? Shall I come to grief for what I did to Epsom?"

Returning to the inclosure he looked the place over long and attentively. What he expected to find it would have been hard to say, but his guilty mind conjured up any quantity of fears growing out of the possibility that there might be some change which would reveal the crime by which he had sent Epsom out of the world.

An hour longer he remained in the cellar, and then returned to his room. There he continued his meditations.

"I must clear every one out of this house. The help shall go, and Amy shall go. If she don't marry Nickol she shall go to Europe, or somewhere where she will not be around me. All who can possibly know of Epsom shall get from my sight. Yes, yes; no more spying upon me."

So ran his thoughts, but, at last, he grew tired and began to think of rest. He lay down, but sleep did not come promptly at his bidding. He tossed on the bed until the night waned, and then, finally, Nature succumbed and he fell asleep.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE HIDDEN HAND.

"WAL, I do declare this is the duller evenin' I ever run up ag'in'. Here I'm out fer a little excitement, an' things is as dry as Sahara Desert. I'm playin' in hard luck!"

This melancholy repiner was Plum Gilder. He had been wandering around, on this same evening last referred to, with the hope of finding the coveted excitement, but he had thus far looked in vain. He was now near Nerve Nickol's hotel, but he did not see the sport anywhere about, and it was too late to call on him.

"Dull as Sahara!"

Again the lament, but as it passed his lips a hand was laid on the boy's shoulder. He turned quickly and saw a man who had much the same appearance, he thought, as a well-to-do Wall street banker.

"Busy?" questioned the man.

"Not especial," Plum replied.

"Can you do a job for me?"

"I guess so. W'ot is it?"

"To save Nerve Nickol!"

"Eh?"

Plum started with surprise, and then gazed more sharply at his companion. His expression suddenly changed.

"Thunder!" he gasped.

"What is it?"

"Say, boss, you are the jigger that did the gang up brown at Peggy Benner's house—Griffin, or whatever your name is. Names don't count fer much, but I have set you down as a detective."

"I trust I am not the worse for that in your eyes?"

"You bet you ain't, but I sort o' want ter get on to this racket—"

"We were speaking about saving Nerve Nickol."

"Is he really in danger?"

"He is, and you are the one to save him. I am too busy, and I am well aware of your great good judgment and pluck. Now, I'm so busy I will come right to the point. There is a plot to turn on the gas in Nickol's room to-night, when he is asleep, and I want to save him on the quiet. If I will introduce you secretly into one of the sport's rooms, will you lie low until the gas-fiend comes and does his work, and then simply turn the gas off again?"

"Why not warn Nick, first off?"

"Because I want to make sure of getting my man, and Nickol would be sure to ruin all. He is so hot-blooded he would spoil my game, and it is vitally necessary that the gas-fiend should come and go unmolested. Such is my plan. Will you help me, or shall I have to count you out, wholly, and take measures to see that you do not go to Nickol?"

"Mister Detective, there is a threat implied in yer language which don't skeer me as a free-born American citizen, but we will let et go that you could bluff me off ef I refused ter obey yc. I don't refuse! I'll do yer orders like a little jewel, by gum!"

Plum's easy confidence made the detective smile for a moment, but the smile was soon gone.

"Are you sure not to get rattled when the gas-fiend is gone, and thus let Nickol die?"

"Not a rattle!"

"Good!"

Some further directions "Griffin" gave, and then he led Plum to the hotel. Evidently he had all arranged there, for he conducted the boy to a room with an air of unconcern. It was understood that there should be no talk there, and, with all directions fully given, the detective turned and went out.

Plum was alone in total darkness.

"I'll be jiggered ef this ain't interestin'!" he thought, grimly. "Nick is in the next room, asleep, an' I'm ter wait fer the killer who is not ter kill. Deponent says the door is ajar, an' all I hev ter do is to wait an' keep my eyes open. Nice scheme, an', say, that detective is jest a screamer! Who is he? What is he? Always showin' up when wanted, always playin' a lone hand, always unseen but seein' all, himself—why, he's ez mysterious as beer in a Bowery dive!"

With this verdict plum settled down to his watch, after making sure the door was ajar, as stated.

Time wore on and the watch grew monotonous and unpleasant, but Plum was faithful to his trust. Careful listening enabled him to hear the breathing of the sport. Where was the man who was expected to try to take his life?

Eleven o'clock, twelve!

"Aha!"

Plum breathed the word as he heard a faint clicking sound as if some one was trying to unlock the door which led from Nick's sleeping room to the hall. Another sound, and he knew the door was open.

Some one crossed the floor.

Soft and stealthy were the steps.

"The killer is there!" whispered Plum.

At one side of the room paused the man.

There was a brief delay; then he turned, and went back to the hall-door. His work, whatever it was, was done.

Nerve Nickol slept on.

Plum remembered his promise not to take

decisive action too quick, but, remembering, too, that the sleeping room was at the front of the hotel, he silently crossed the floor and looked out of the window.

He saw a man emerge from the building. The latter was about to go away when he was accosted by a second man. The first of the twain started as if with fear. He raised his hand as if to strike a blow, but the hand was suddenly beaten down and, like a flash, handcuffs were snapped upon his wrists. A third man had come forward, and now the two seized the "gas fiend" and hustled him toward a cab which stood near at hand. The work was successful; he was urged in, and, in a few seconds more, the vehicle hurried away with the horse at a smart pace.

The abduction of the would-be slayer had been performed with neatness and dispatch, and without creating any alarm.

As Plum drew back with a deep breath he realized that he drew in more than healthful air with the breath. The gas was beginning to escape freely.

Knowing his pledge of silence was now up the boy struck a match and soon had a light, the flowing gas being all ready for him.

"The killer saved me the trouble o' turnin' et on," thought Plum.

He looked toward Nickol. The latter was still asleep, but the light shone full on his face, and he began to stir uneasily. Anxious to have some one to confide in, Plum awakened him at once. Nick sat up and stared in wonder.

"How the dickens did you get here?" he demanded.

"Didn't expect me, eh?"

"No."

"Wal, here I be."

"Why?"

"Just saved you from a serious grapple with death."

"You jest. But what does this mean? Did Joseph let you in?"

"Meanin' your valet? I ain't never seen the gent. No, he didn't let me in, an' I don't know where he is."

"Isn't he here?"

"No."

"Then the knave is off on another drunk. But why the dickens are *you* here, Plum?"

"You shall hev the whole story."

Plum was eager to tell it, and the narrative lost nothing in his hands. Yet, when it was told Nick still looked puzzled.

"I don't see through this," he confessed.

"Nor me."

"Who is this man who sent you here?"

"Give et up! He's a detective, an' the same feller who once give the name of Griffin; also, the feller who give me the lift when I was tryin' ter get Amy out o' Benner's ranch. Who he is I don't know."

"He seems to be a living mystery."

"So he is."

"How did he know an attempt was to be made on my life?"

"You hev got me once more."

"And who was the man who came in here to turn on the gas?"

"Ef my eyes ain't all out o' kilter, et was our friend Tony. But I ain't sure."

"Very likely. That knave is bound to get his head into a noose before he lets up. If we had him in Rusty Gulch he would do it quickly. As for this detective, who comes and goes like a shadow, he beats my time. How he knew as much as he did, and could use his power, I do not see. Very likely he had an understanding with the people of the hotel, but it is useless to ask them. If they are in with a detective they will not confess the fact to a common fellow like me. Plum, you did your part nobly, and have once more proved that you are a trump card. I won't forget it in you. Ah! if I had a valet as faithful as you this would not have occurred. Suppose Joseph Jones is off on a big drunk—not that I ever saw him full, but he *must* be a rounder, or he would not make nightly absences as he does. When I see him next he and I will part company."

Nick kept Plum with him until morning, and then saw that he had a good breakfast. After this the boy went his way.

It was an hour later that Joseph Jones came in. He showed no signs of being under the influence of drink, but Nick at once addressed him severely.

"Joe, how much do I owe you now?"

"About five dollars, I should say, sir," the valet politely replied.

"Here it is. Git!"

"Beg pardon, sir?"

"Git! You are discharged."

"For what reason, sir?"

"Drunkenness!"

"Have you ever seen me drunk, sir?" reproachfully asked Joseph.

"No, and that makes it all the worse. You are too much of a night-hawk to please me, and we part company here."

"But, sir," meekly began Joseph.

"Not a word. I have put up with this as long as I will. Go!"

And Joseph sadly packed his belongings and went.

CHAPTER XXXV.

WILD SCENES OF THE NIGHT.

AT supper, that night, Abram Hamilton did not appear to eat with Amy. Susan, failing to get any answer to her knock at his door, tried the door and found it locked. She did not succeed in learning whether the room was occupied or not.

It was nine o'clock when Abram came into the room where Amy sat sewing. He stood and looked around dully for awhile, and then asked:

"Do you know where my kite is?"

"Do I know—*what*?"

"Where my kite is?"

"What do you mean?"

"I can't find my kite," replied Abram, plaintively. "I was out in the Battery, flying it, this morning, and now it is gone. I don't see how I could have misplaced it thus."

The old man's tone was sad, but there was more than that in what the words conveyed to Amy. She looked at him in alarm. She had not misunderstood him; he really was calling for a "kite," and the fact that his mind ran on the plaything of childhood was far more than humorous; it was pathetic. And as she noticed the expression on his face she did not doubt that his mind was wandering.

Weaker the bond between the two was daily becoming, but in this emergency Amy could not well be oblivious to his needs. One of the greatest of these needs, she thought, was to get him to rest, and she turned her attention to the subject.

After some persuasion he seemed to forget his desire and acquiesced in the suggestion that he go to bed, which he did in due time. He left Amy not a little worried. A crazy man in the house was not a pleasant thing to think about, and though Abram gave no evidence of being violent, the fact that his mind had turned to the long-past days when he used to fly kites in Battery Park—a thing of which she had often heard him speak intelligently—there was the danger that he might not continue harmless.

She had some idea of calling in a friend to act as her companion, but the Hamilton affairs were in such an unsettled condition that she did not like to do it.

She hoped for the best, but she would have been more than ever worried could she have seen the money-lender then.

When he retired sleep did not come at his bidding, and he tossed restlessly on the bed for some time, during which period the fancies of his disordered mind all the while became more dangerous.

He finally rose.

"I can't sleep with the ghost of Epsom Griggs in this room!" he muttered. "It would not be so bad if it would keep a little back, but to sit right at the head of my bed, and mock at me all the while, is disagreeable. I will have a light and see if it will go away."

He lighted the gas and looked fixedly toward where he imagined the ghost to be. Then he shook his head.

"It don't go!"

It did not go—from his fancy. It would never go, but he did not realize that.

He moved around restlessly for a time, and then addressed his conversation directly to the thing he imagined he saw.

"Now, see here, Epsom, this is not the right thing to do. I apologized to you, last night, when you sent your ghost in, and told you it was not right for me to kill you. Any gentleman will accept an apology, and

you should show your good breeding. I beg of you to take this specter of yours away."

He waved his hand, but the ghostly object remained. Then he renewed his arguments, and talked long and earnestly—but the ghost remained.

Abram grew excited. He had the impression that he was being used very unjustly, and this destroyed his calmness utterly. He walked the room and muttered disconsolately.

"How am I to get rid of this thing?" he wondered. "There is no rest for me until it is gone. What can I do to lay the ghost?"

He meditated deeply.

"I have it!" he finally exclaimed.

Pleased, at last, he laughed unnaturally.

"Epsom's body must be burned with due rites," he decided. "That will work the cure, if anything will. I will do it, and then all will be well. Yes, yes; I can fix it."

In his room he had a kerosene lamp which he often burned to avoid the extra expense of gas, and this he now lighted. Equipped with this he left the room and descended to the lower part of the house.

Unknown to him, he was followed. Amy had heard the sounds he made, and when he set out on his trip she followed at a safe distance. She was freshly worried, feeling that he might do harm—too much worried to dare to speak to him, again, and try the effect of her influence.

Down to the basement she followed, and then to the cellar. The last step she took with shrinking which she could not control, but she still managed to avoid notice.

She saw Abram go to the little room where he had on a former occasion carried the body of Epsom Griggs, and there set his lamp down. He waved his arms wildly.

"Yes, yes, you shall be satisfied," he exclaimed, "I will confess that I killed you, but it was all done in good will. You had let me have the money all those years, and time had made it mine by possession. If you had brought suit at law I should have won, and that would have been a hardship to you. It was better for me to kill you."

He paused and seemed to listen to a reply.

"Yes, yes; I will take good care of your money. Did you ever know me," the old man added, "to neglect to take good care of money? Ha! ha! I love the stuff, and no one could care for it better than I!"

Again the attitude of listening.

"You are right," he then went on, "your body must not lie here as it is. Confess that I killed you? Never, Epsom; never!"

He grew more excited and waved his arms still more wildly.

"I will never confess; never!"

Again the silence.

"So, you agree, do you? Well, that is only justice to me. It is not right that I should suffer because you came here and demanded the money which had been mine so many years."

There was the lightest of footfalls behind Amy. She did not hear them; she did not suspect there had been another listener, and another watcher in the cellar.

"Well, we are agreed on this point," remarked Abram, after another pause. "Only one thing remains to be done, and that is to lay your ghost by disposing of your body. It shall be done."

The deranged man began to collect the smallest of the boards which were near the spot, and all of these he piled up over the very place where he had buried Epsom's body. Some of the thinnest he splintered with his hands, so he formed a pile of satisfactory kindling wood.

When it was done he surveyed his work and laughed loudly.

"It will be a great sight; a great sight!" he declared. "Ah! your ghost shall rest in peace, Epsom Griggs. Now for the work!"

He had brought matches from his own room, and one of these he now struck and, as the little flame took full life, he leaned forward to touch it to the kindlings.

When Amy saw it was his intention to set fire to the place she had been momentarily rendered incapable of motion, but as the critical instant came she suddenly rushed forward.

"Stop!" she cried.

Abram paused.

"What do you want here?" he demanded.

Amy blew out the match.

"What would you do?" she demanded.

"I am going to have a fine bonfire."

"No, no; you must not do it."

"Must not? Who says 'must not' to me? Get away, girl; I am going to have my bonfire; I am going to lay the ghost. You try to stop me at your peril!"

He struck another match. Again she tried to blow it out, but he frustrated her, and then gave her a push which made her reel and fall.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed, wildly, "we will see if there is to be no bonfire. I will burn this accursed house to the ground!"

He touched the match to the kindlings, but, at that moment, he received a push in turn which made him stagger away. A foot was set on the tongue of fire he had started, and the peril was over for the time. But if the fire was avoided there was other danger.

Abram saw a man before him, and he grew frantic.

He had sense enough to set his lamp on the pile of boards, and then his fury broke loose.

"I will kill you!" he yelled.

He leaped at the man like a tiger, and the two grappled in a fierce contest. Amy had regained her balance, and she looked in dismay as she saw them stagger to and fro. Who the second man was she did not know, but she was impressed with the belief that help ought to be summoned, and she started for the upper part of the house.

Once beyond the little inclosure she had to go wholly in darkness, and she fell in seeking to reach the stairs. More time was consumed than ought to have been the case, but she hurried up, at last. As she reached the hall she saw the form of a man. Was it the male servant?

"James, is it you?" she called.

"Yes," replied a thick voice.

"Come down immediately; father needs your help!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE DETECTIVE IN THE CASE.

AMY hardly knew what she said, but she was obeyed without delay. The man came quickly her way, and she turned and preceded him down the stairs. When she reached the cellar she expected to see the struggle still going on, but all was singularly still.

Forward she went until she reached the corner of the inclosure, and then she turned to the supposed servant to give directions. As she did this a man abruptly came out of the inclosure, lamp in hand, and the light fell full upon the face of the man who had followed her.

She looked and made a startling discovery. It was Egbert Walton!

Dumfounded, she could not speak or turn her gaze away, but in the mean while the two men looked with equal wonder—it was a surprise for each. He who held the lamp was the first to recover, and with a quick motion he drew a revolver and presented it at the breast of the crook.

"Surrender!" he cried.

Walton brushed his hand across his eyes.

"Who—who are you?" he gasped.

"I am Charon, detective! Surrender!"

There was the speech of the man with the lamp, and he followed it up with decisive action. He saw that Walton was dazed, and he improved the chance. Setting the lamp down, he made a few quick motions and handcuffs clicked on the wrists of the crook.

"It is time to end this, Walton!" he coolly remarked.

Now that the deed was done, and the time too late, the schemer began to use his strength. He wrestled with the handcuffs, but all in vain. Charon stood by and watched without a sign of emotion until Walton gave it up in sullen despair.

"It is better so," then observed the detective. "You are at the end of your rope."

"And you have triumphed!" groaned the crook.

"I have, and it was an inevitable result. At any time in the past weeks I might have reached this end. I have not let you blindly

have your liberty, to remain or run away as you chose; you have been watched, and any attempt on your part to leave the city would have met with arrest by the men I have had shadow you."

He turned to Amy

"Miss Hamilton, for your sake I regret that your father is in such bad shape, mentally, but possibly it is all for the best. We will all go to the parlor, if you are willing."

Amy could not answer. She was looking fixedly at the detective, who seemed to exert some strange influence over her.

In the struggle between Charon and Abram the latter had fallen and stunned himself, and then the former put handcuffs on his wrists to prevent further outbreak. He now carried Abram to the parlor, and, later, led Walton to the same place. To Amy he then said

"We will await the coming of day, and then end all this."

"Sir," replied Amy, "have I not seen you before this, some time?"

"When do you think you have seen me?"

"I do not know."

"Later we may be able to decide by comparing notes. Let it rest for now, though. At present let us give our attention to waiting for the coming of day."

Early the next morning Nerve Nickol received a message from Amy which read as follows:

"Will you please call here as soon as possible?"

He answered the summons with all possible speed. When he arrived and was admitted by Susan he saw at once that something out of the ordinary course of events had happened, but he was hardly prepared for the story Amy told him, incomplete as her narrative necessarily was. When it was over he was taken to see the detective, who lingered with his prisoner as yet.

"Mr. Nickol," said the officer, with grave politeness, "we are glad to have you with us."

Nickol made no reply but gazed with an astonished face. Utterly bewildered the sport seemed to be.

"Well, sir?" questioned Charon, quietly.

"Jupiter! do I dream or is this—"

"Who?"

"Joseph Jones, by the Eternal!" exclaimed Nick.

"I am the man who has been known as Joseph Jones," calmly assented the detective.

"Joseph—my valet—"

"Even so. My disguise does not deceive you, which proves you have keen eyes. Are you surprised? Remember you are in New York, the city of wonders, and be surprised at nothing. Sit down, Mr. Nickol; I have something to say to you, and it is possible that when you know the exact situation you may be willing to talk in return. Kindly be seated."

"My name, sir, is Terrill, and I am a detective. Some weeks ago I received word that a man named Epsom Griggs had been released from Joliet prison, Illinois. He was an old offender, and I was requested to watch him casually and see if he dipped into crime again. If he did I was to notify the authorities, and he was to be arrested and tried for a suspended crime, and again jailed."

"I did watch him, and I found him on friendly terms with a counterfeiter named Walton, Tony Pierson and other lawless characters."

"Suddenly Griggs disappeared. I shadowed Walton and his gang to see if light could be had. One night I was attacked on a pier by them and thrown into the river for dead. They made a big mistake; I was but stunned, the water revived me, and I easily escaped unaided. From that time I have watched them secretly, now and then alarming them with a note signed Charon, but never making myself fully visible to them. All the while I had helpers ready to seize them if they tried to leave town, but they did not try."

"The high official in Illinois who had employed me was aware that money had been secured from Griggs by Abram Hamilton, and it was thought the latter might try to get it back. It was also told to me that a

man named Philip Dudley had assumed the name of Norman Nickol and started this way, unknown to any of the other actors in the game, to take a hand in regard to this same money."

"Knowing this, but not fully knowing the part which Nickol would act, I determined to watch him too, and to accomplish this result I assumed the role of an English servant, took the name of Joseph Jones, and, in brief, became your valet."

"Jove! and I have all the while had a detective in my employ!" exclaimed Nick.

"Yes. Now, I think you will understand what I was doing in this house when being detected, I pretended to be a sleep-walker, and, too, you will see I did meddle with your papers, to learn what I could from them. I have often been absent from my post of duty as your hired man, and you have accused me of indulging in dissipation. Really, my mysterious absence meant simply that I was engaged in detective work on this case."

"I am dumfounded!" declared Nick.

"Are you no more?"

"What do you mean?"

"I have told my story. Have you none to tell?"

"I have!" impulsively cried the sport. "You are right when you say my name is Philip Dudley. As you doubtless know I have passed the last few years as a miner in the West. Recently a brother of my deceased mother died, and his papers were sent to me as his heir. It seemed to be all he had left me, but I found more in the papers. I found that he had been half-brother to one Epsom Griggs; that he had been wronged out of money by Griggs, who had in turn lost it to Abram Hamilton. Determined to see if this money was obtainable I came to New York, calling myself Norman Nickol, and assuming the role of a 'sport' through reasons of careless indifference more than anything else."

"I was resolved to press matters at the start, but I not only found them muddled, but, having seen Hamilton's daughter, I was reluctant to take from what she undoubtedly regarded as her own. I decided to defer action, but how was I to live in the meanwhile? I wrote to an old school friend for a loan, which has come, but, in the meanwhile, I several times replenished my funds in the most ignoble way a man can get money—by gambling."

"I am glad to say that nightmare-like part of my life is over, and I can now live like a decent man."

"If you see fit to press the matter here you will be able to prove your claim to a big slice of the Hamilton property, principal and interest, will you not?" asked Terrill.

"Yes."

"I dare say that will be arranged. Hamilton is, I think, insane to that point where he will not long live, and you and Amy will be left to settle the matter."

"And Epsom Griggs?"

"Dead! Killed by Hamilton and buried in the cellar. I have suspected this. Last night I entered the house secretly to try my idea. I have learned that it was correct. Let us not speak of it, now; both Griggs and Hamilton were of a caliber far from honest, and I, for one, shall shed no tears over them. What now?"

Susan had approached.

"There is a boy and a girl here who want to see Mr. Nickol, and they gave me this note."

Nick received it and read with a smile.

"Is it Plum Gilder?" asked Terrill.

"Yes, and Peggy Benner. The note says Tony has been arrested—"

"It was by my orders. All the Fancy Five are now in custody, I think."

The voice of Plum Gilder sounded from the hall:

"No, I don't keer to go in an' set down on one o' them fine-lookin' chairs. I'll stand right here until I get word from N. Nickol, Esquire, my chum an' pard. Him an' me are a team of two, an' he's a hoss in the two-ten class."

"Loyal Plum!" murmured Nick. "If this matter is ever straightened out he shall not be forgotten."

The end soon came. Abram Hamilton failed rapidly and died. Walton and the other

members of the Fancy Five were tried and sent to prison, with sentences of just severity.

Nick and Amy had no trouble in settling their affairs. There were some severe shocks to all, though the heaviest was avoided by the fact which Amy now made known that she was not Hamilton's daughter, but the child of his wife by a former marriage; and thus all was smoothed out.

It need hardly be stated that Nick and Amy were married in due time.

The detective continued his old life.

Plum and Peggy were made the wards of the ex-sport and his wife, and put in the way of happy and useful lives, which bid fair to be united at some later date.

Nick and Amy remain in New York, and their careers have been unalloyed happiness since the close of the drama here related.

THE END.

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